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19

*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*

Tachi of Wind



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IFRITAH!

Alma's heart called out the name of her mid-class contract spirit, and a giant lion-shaped beast appeared out of thin air.

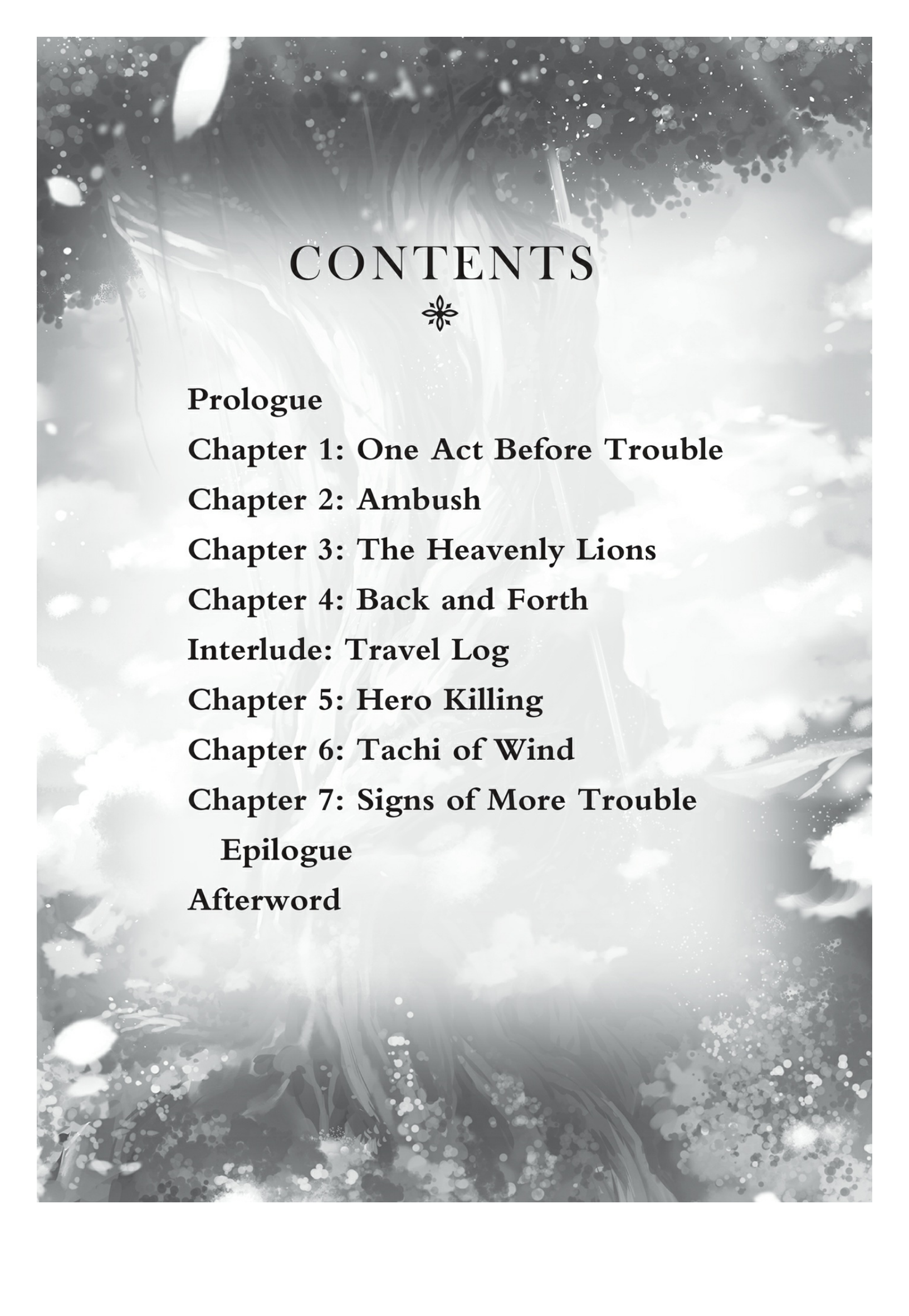


*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*



"THAT'S RIGHT... THAT'S WHY WE HAVE TO BE THE ONES TO FIGHT. I DON'T WANT TO HAVE HARUTO PROTECT ME ALL THE TIME—I'M NOT GOING TO BE A BURDEN!"

"I WAS THE ONE WHO SAID I WANTED TO STAY WITH HARUTO! THAT'S WHY IT'S NOT HIS FAULT!"



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Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.



Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.



Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.



Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.



Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.



Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.



Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under the protection of Rio, along with Miharu and Aki.





Flora Beltrum

Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Finally reunited with her older sister, Christina.



Christina Beltrum

First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Protected by Rio, together with Flora.



Sendo Takahisa

Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.



Sakata Hiroaki

A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.



Shigekura Rui

A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.



Kikuchi Renji

One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...



Liselotte Cretia

Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.



Aria Governess

Liselotte's head attendant and an enchanted sword wielder. Has been friends with Celia since their academy days.



Sumeragi Satsuki

Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.



Charlotte Galarc

Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Shows strong affection towards Haruto.



Reiss

A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.



Sakuraba Erika

The woman who caused a revolution in a minor nation. Is hiding her identity as a hero.

Prologue

In front of a thick and overgrown forest, far from human civilization...

Liselotte and Aria had been carried several kilometers away from the capital of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica by Aishia. The intense battle between Rio and the divine beast was so fierce, they could observe it even this far from the capital.

However, with the naked eye, they could only see the large-scale attacks at this distance. They could just make out Rio evading the light beams when they used a physical ability enhancement to boost their vision, but the larger attacks had stopped a few minutes ago. The sky was a clear blue right now.

Aishia had returned to Rio just a short while ago. While they had succeeded in retrieving Liselotte, the mood in the air was anything but celebratory.

“...”

Liselotte and Aria both gazed at the capital with bated breath; they remained that way for some time.

“It seems they’ve returned.”

“Oh...!”

Aria spotted Aishia first, approaching from afar with Rio in her arms. One beat later, Liselotte saw them as well. She started running to shorten the distance between them as much as possible, with Aria following her.

The distance between them was soon closed, and Aishia landed before the two of them. Rio lay limply in her arms.

“Aishia! Is Sir Haruto okay?!” Liselotte said in a panic, panting for breath as she worried for Rio’s well-being. She leaned right into his unconscious face and stared at him.

“He’s fine. His life is not in danger,” Aishia informed her plainly.

“But...”

There were red stains by his mouth, as though he had coughed up blood. He had been injured enough in the battle to render him unconscious—that was more than enough reason for her to remain concerned. He had to be allowed to rest right away. And in order to reassure Liselotte...

“Yeah, I want to let Haruto rest.” Aishia’s voice was usually monotonous, but she nodded firmly and laid Rio on the ground. She then started pushing her magic essence into the ground, preparing the foundations for the stone house. Small stones on the ground sank into the dirt, and the lumpy terrain flattened in the blink of an eye.

“...”

Aria was familiar with the sight from her travels with Rio, but Liselotte’s eyes widened seeing it for the first time. That being said, there were more important matters to address right now, so she merely looked on with apologetic impatience.

Ignoring Liselotte, Aishia picked up Rio’s arm. It was the arm with a bracelet; the Time-Space Cache was attached, but it could only be activated by the person with the registered essence wavelength. A maximum of two people could be registered. The armband Rio normally used had Celia’s essence wavelength in the other slot, so Aishia wasn’t registered, but...

“Dissolvo.”

Aishia uttered the spell and activated the Time-Space Cache. It was a feat only possible because Aishia was contracted to Rio and had his magic essence flowing through her. “Come in,” she said.

“Okay.”

Aishia picked Rio up gently and started walking towards the newly installed stone house. Out of her worry for Rio, Liselotte dashed for the entrance before Aria to open the door for them.



“You two should rest here. I’m going to look after Haruto.”

The first thing Aishia did after entering the stone house was, of course, tend

to Rio. She gave Liselotte and Aria directions to wait in the living room, then made for the back of the house with the unconscious Rio in her arms. However, the two of them weren't about to sit down obediently.

"U-Umm, is there anything I can help with?" Liselotte asked after Aishia's back, her face filled with regret.

"His clothes are stained with blood, so I'm going to change them and wipe him clean." Aishia stated her intentions as though she was open to receiving help.

"If you're going to wipe him, you'll need to take him to the bathroom. I'll get the tub and towels ready first." Aria had stayed in the house for the entire journey to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica, so she knew where everything was located. She went first into the changing room that connected to the bathroom.

"You come too, Liselotte."

"Okay!"

Aishia started walking with Liselotte. Aria had already retrieved towels and washing agents from the shelf and was opening the door to the bathroom. There, she fiddled with the magic artifacts attached to the washing area to start filling a tub with warm water.

"I'll support him while you remove his coat and shirt," Aishia said to Liselotte.

"Okay." Liselotte lifted Rio's arms gently and removed his coat first. Next, Aishia held Rio's arms up high while Liselotte took his shirt off too. Rio's upper body entered their view.

As a noblewoman, Liselotte had never seen a naked man in her life—not even her father, Duke Cretia—but now was not the time to worry about that. And yet...

"Uh..."

Liselotte stared at Rio's naked body from up close and swallowed her breath. It wasn't because his body was firmer than she had imagined, but...

"These wounds..."

She stared at the countless small scars he had.

“They’re not wounds from the battle with the saint, so don’t worry. They’re old scars from his childhood. They’re all healed already,” Aishia said to reassure her.

“I see...” Liselotte’s expression didn’t brighten. If wounds were treated with magic before they healed, then no scars would be left behind. The fact these old scars remained meant that Rio hadn’t received any magic treatment when he suffered those wounds.

Even then, light wounds would naturally disappear over time, yet Rio’s body was covered in clearly distorted scars. An unobservant eye might have dismissed them as battle wounds, but Liselotte’s eye was unfortunately observant. She suspected they were scars from some kind of torture or abuse.

“...” Aria squeezed the water out of the towel in her hand and stared closely at Rio’s body. But while Liselotte’s expression was pained with her grief, Aria had an odd look on her face.

“Is something wrong?” Aishia asked, looking at the two of them curiously.

“No... Please use this towel.” Aria shook her head slowly and offered Liselotte the damp towel.

“Right.” Liselotte accepted the towel and began to wipe gently at Rio’s mouth, which was dirtied with blood and spit.

Sir Haruto... Sir Haruto...

Tears welled in her eyes, but her hand never stopped moving. She was worrying so earnestly for Rio, who had gotten wounded for her sake, that the affectionate movement of her hands appeared to be shaking.

“If we’re just removing the blood clots, then there should be no need to remove his pants. I’ll wash the dirty coat and shirt.”

Aria picked up Rio’s coat and shirt and began to wash them.



Chapter 1: One Act Before Trouble

Some time later, in the mountainous outskirts of the Galarc capital...

Orphia, the high elf girl, stood at a location with a fine view several kilometers from the capital of Galtuuk. There was no one else around her; she was moving separately from Miharuru and the others in the royal castle in order to set up a destination point for teleportation sorcery.

The first step was to select a location. Barely anyone ever climbed this mountain, but she still had to use spirit arts to stabilize the terrain and secure the area. She put up a perception-blocking barrier and a field to conceal the disorder of magic essence after teleporting. There were a lot of steps, but she was finally done.

“Okay, the spell circle is stable and the barriers are complete... Now, *Dissolvo.*”

Just like how there were two stone houses, there were two Time-Space Caches. Orphia used hers to take out the teleport crystal she had borrowed from Rio in advance.

The destination registered in the crystal was the spirit folk village. Now that the preparations were complete, she had no need to remain here anymore. She would return to the village to bring Gouki and the others here to Galarc.

With Rio gone to retrieve Liselotte, she wouldn't be able to bring them to the castle immediately, so they'd have to remain in the stone house until his return. But the original plan was to bring Gouki's group over as soon as the preparations in Strahl were complete, so Gouki and the others were still waiting for that to happen.

“*Instans Motus.*” Orphia chanted a spell, activating the teleport crystal. The space around her immediately distorted—a sign of the sorcery activating. Just before she teleported, Orphia glanced over at the capital of Galtuuk. Then, just before the spell completed and moved her to the village, the sight of countless

black shapes raining down on the capital caught her eyes.

“Wha...?”

The teleportation completed: what filled Orphia’s view now was the sight of the forest and spring near the spirit folk village. The scenery was extremely peaceful, but...

“What...was that...?”

Orphia’s face stiffened at the sinister omen she’d just witnessed.

“...”

She had a bad feeling about this. Propelled by her intuition, Orphia hurried towards the village.



At roughly the same time, in the capital of the Beltrum Kingdom, Celia’s father, Count Roland Claire, was visiting the royal castle. He had been personally summoned by Duke Arbor himself.

“What matters did you wish to discuss today?” Roland asked after they had exchanged curt greetings with each other in a meeting room.

“Negotiations with the Restoration will be held in the near future. The location will be the Galarc Kingdom. I’d like you to attend, Count Claire,” Duke Arbor said, stating his demands simply.

“I see... But why me?” Roland feigned confusion as he sought more information.

After being suspected of assisting Christina out of the castle, he was essentially treated as a spy by Duke Arbor’s faction. There was no concrete evidence to convict him, but he had been relieved of his position in the capital and placed under the watch of a dispatch supervisor while managing the affairs of his territory. He had also been cut off from any news of the capital, so Roland wanted to use this chance to gain as much information as he could.

“You should have a lot of contacts with that side, no?” Duke Arbor said with blunt implication behind his words.

“Haha... I don’t think so.” Roland tried to brush off the question with a shrug.

“Your beloved daughter seems to have settled over there.” Duke Arbor pointed out how Celia, who was supposed to have been kidnapped from the wedding ceremony with Charles, was now a member of the Restoration.

Naturally, Duke Arbor was aware that Celia’s abduction had been arranged by Christina, who felt indebted to her from her academy days and wanted her to join the Restoration. Like the spies in Beltrum working for Duke Huguenot, there were spies in the Restoration working for Duke Arbor and keeping him informed.

“I was also bewildered by that news.” Roland sighed to express his lack of knowledge regarding Celia’s abduction.

Duke Arbor furrowed his brow at the sly reaction. “There’s no mistake that your daughter has settled over there. I have contacts who have seen her in person.”

“So it appears. I will not deny that it seems she has joined the Restoration,” Roland said, implying that he had objections to other accusations.

Duke Arbor looked at Roland with suspicion, but he knew it was futile to make accusations without any evidence—it had been as such since Christina first escaped Beltrum Castle.

He had no intention of digging further into either that or the connection between Roland and the Restoration. Duke Arbor chose to get on with the discussion. “Fine. In which case, it should be clear why your presence is requested.”

“However, I cannot imagine my presence making any difference. Are you saying you want me to attend just for numbers?”

Surely not, Roland implied in his tone as he tried to probe for more information from Duke Arbor.

“That’s right.” Duke Arbor nodded dismissively, preemptively cutting off any questions Roland could lead him towards.

He probably wanted to avoid giving Roland any unnecessary information, but

his attitude could also be interpreted as that of a successful veteran soldier who loathed the bothersome tactics of civil officials. At any rate, probing any further against such an attitude would be like stirring the hornet's nest for Roland.

"I see... I have no reason to refuse, then."

Considering how unbalanced the relations were between Duke Arbor and Roland, there was no choice but to accept. He'd also be able to hear the state of affairs himself if he attended, so Roland obediently accepted without a fight.

"Then it's decided. The negotiations will be held in the near future. I will send a messenger to your territory once the date is confirmed. I doubt I need to say this, but keep your schedule open."

Duke Arbor stood up, indicating the end of their discussion. He made sure to add a snide remark about Roland's lack of duties in the capital as well. Making Roland travel all the way out to the capital for a message like this was also a clear act of harassment, but Roland showed no particular irritation.

"Understood. I shall take my leave after finishing this cup of tea," he said, picking up his teacup and sipping it gracefully.

"Hmph." Duke Arbor snorted in disgust and left the room.

What Duke Arbor fears the most right now is nobles outside of his faction regaining power, but... Roland returned his teacup to its saucer and lost himself in his thoughts.

The Arbor family's power had definitely lessened after Celia's abduction from Charles's wedding and Christina's escape from the castle.

At the same time, there was a definite lack of anyone who could stand up to the Arbor faction in the present capital. Everyone had either been expelled from the capital and joined the Restoration, or been removed from their positions like Roland and lost power. So while there were signs of the Arbor faction's decline, with no other force that could oppose them in the capital, their position was as strong as ever. The other nobles that pandered to Duke Arbor also received favorable treatment without Duke Huguenot's faction around, so they had no reason to risk their positions by stirring things up.

Considering how he's going to negotiate with the Restoration on equal terms

—with me of all people present—he must be rather worried about his son being held hostage. Attending the negotiations is exactly what I wished for. I must use this chance to gain as much information as possible. I may even be able to see my little Celia.

Roland's expression softened.

Celia... It seems she arrived in Rodania safely, but is she really happy over there? Her happiness...

But at the same time, he felt lonely. His expression became gloomy.

Well, I'm sure I can leave her in Princess Christina's hands. And with that boy nearby, she should be well protected...

He recalled Rio, who had escorted Christina and Celia to Rodania. He had been worried half to death when Celia was abducted from the wedding, but those emotions had been replaced with true gratitude when he was told the truth of what had happened.

He understood that Celia trusted Rio. And that Celia had feelings for him.

Guh. There's no doubt that she feels for him...

Now that he had caught on to his beloved daughter's thoughts, he wanted nothing more than to support her happiness. This was the genuine truth, but a father's parental love was complex.

What if in my absence, they... I won't allow it. I definitely won't allow it... They must marry first with me in attendance, at the very least... No, but there'd be no chance to hold a wedding in this situation... Even so, if he touches her before marriage... Or after marriage... Ah, but I do want to see my grandchildren's faces. Hm. Hmm...

Roland lost himself to a spiral of negative thoughts. The only thing he could say for certain was—

I won't forgive him if he makes Celia cry.

That much was simple.

What should I do if he makes her cry...? A demonstration of our family's secret magic would be required at the very least...

Seriousness aside, Roland cared for Celia more than anyone else. Yet, at this moment, there was no way for him to know about the evil that was approaching his beloved daughter.

Chapter 2: Ambush

A short while before Orphia returned to the spirit folk village, some important guests were visiting Rio's mansion on the Galarc Castle grounds.

"It's been a while, Princess Christina, Princess Flora."

They were Beltrum Kingdom's First and Second Princess and the current Restoration leaders, Christina and Flora.

"Long time no see, Professor Celia."

"It's so nice to see you again!"

The two of them greeted Celia happily.

"You too. I'm so happy seeing you two again. It must have been a tiring trip here."

"Not at all. Thank you for agreeing to see us on such short notice," Christina said with a bow.

Second Princess Charlotte of the Galarc Kingdom was also there, but in Rio's absence, Celia's relationship with Christina and Flora made her best suited as host. Miharuru and the other girls didn't have any experience dealing with the noble class either, so she was the only option other than Charlotte.

Charlotte's knight Louise and Christina's knight Vanessa were waiting with the other guards outside the room.

"Unfortunately, Haruto is absent right now..."

"I would have liked to express my gratitude to Sir Amakawa, but the main purpose of my visit today concerns you, Professor Celia."

Celia looked puzzled. "Me?"

"Yes. I've already informed Princess Charlotte—or rather, the Galarc Kingdom is already aware—but a meeting between the Restoration and the main Beltrum Kingdom will be held in the near future," Christina said with a glance at

Charlotte.

“That’s...”

“Starting with your wedding ceremony, Duke Arbor has had a string of failures to address. Charles and Alfred were taken prisoner, and I was able to escape and join the Restoration. I’m sure he’s quite panicked about it, as he has approached us for negotiations.”

“Has the ironclad Arbor family finally started losing its power?”

“It would appear so.”

At present, over a thousand of Beltrum Kingdom’s nobles had joined the Restoration, including spouses and children. But that was still a minority compared to the number of nobles the Arbor faction controlled in Beltrum. And in noble society politics, the size of the faction meant everything. That was why Duke Huguenot’s faction was unable to justify themselves and had lost their place in the capital.

However, power was an uncertain substance in noble society. This was because only a small fraction of the nobles in a faction were invested too deeply to back out—most nobles in the faction were able to switch sides to their convenience as circumstances changed.

In fact, many of the nobles in Duke Huguenot’s faction had joined Duke Arbor when his territory was lost to the Proxia Empire.

“We can’t let this opportunity slip through our hands, then.”

Duke Arbor’s failures could be used to regain those drifting nobles. Their distance from the capital made it difficult to physically contact those nobles, but Duke Arbor’s power was definitely weakening. If he was the one approaching for negotiations, they’d be able to turn things in their favor.

“We’re still in the midst of discussing our agenda for the negotiations, but they’ve requested the return of Charles and Alfred, as well as Alfred’s enchanted sword.”

Charles was Duke Arbor’s heir, and Alfred was the strongest knight in the country. The sword he used, the Light Blade of Judgment, was also a national

treasure.

“They’re all powerful cards for negotiation.”

“Yes. And they were all given to us by Sir Amakawa. I wanted to thank him once again for his assistance, but... It seems like things are rather serious over here. I heard Sir Amakawa headed out to rescue Lady Liselotte.”

Christina was acquainted with Liselotte herself and sometimes kept in contact with her. Her expression clouded with worry.

“Sir Haruto will definitely bring Liselotte back to us,” Charlotte stated firmly, her posture upright and confident.

“Yes,” Celia agreed.

“That’s true. If it’s Sir Amakawa...” Christina nodded, biting back her words. She had witnessed his talents and strength up close and personal during the battle with Lucius in the Paladia Kingdom, which was why she believed in Rio as well.

“That’s right! Sir Haruto can definitely do it!” Flora said.

“I don’t know when he will return, but I will send a message out to you when he does,” Celia said cheerfully to Christina, hoping to wipe the gloomy expression from her face.

“Perhaps I can visit again when he returns with Lady Liselotte. We plan on staying in the Galarc Castle for a while.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. The meeting with the Beltrum Kingdom will almost certainly be held at the Galarc Castle, so the plan is to remain here until then.”

“In that case, we should hold a small party once Sir Haruto returns with Liselotte. I’ll be sure to invite the two of you,” Charlotte suggested after listening to their conversation.

“Oh, that would be lovely. Please do!” Flora immediately leapt at the chance, but—

“Flora.” Christina let out an exasperated warning as a reminder to restrain

herself in the residence of a foreign noble.

“Oh, but only if it isn’t a bother to you...” Flora added with a blush, ashamed of her behavior.

“Neither a sleepover nor a dinner party will be any bother, so please don’t feel reserved,” Celia said with a giggle, looking at her fondly.

Charlotte agreed with a cheeky but charming grin. “Indeed. I have no right to speak as someone half living in this house out of everyone’s kindness, but please come over.”

She had succeeded in accompanying Satsuki to Rio’s mansion at every possible occasion until she had practically taken up residence there herself, but she also acted as King Francois’s messenger and the main point of contact for any nobles who wanted to get closer to Rio.

Whenever something was required, Charlotte would make the necessary arrangements at the speed of light. She did all her work, sometimes in unseen places, and had won over Rio’s trust enough for the residents of the mansion to accept her. There was even a room for her in the mansion.

“Thank you very much. Then, if you don’t mind...” Christina bowed, accepting the offer.

“Then it’s decided. Everyone will be delighted to have you there. They were wondering how the two of you have been doing,” Charlotte said to Christina and Flora.

“If there’s still time after this, we can invite them all over here,” Celia said.

Miharu and the others were inside the mansion, but had excused themselves from the meeting when they heard the visit was for official business with Celia. Only Orphia was elsewhere outside, but she would have come right away if invited as well.

“We wanted to greet everyone as well, so if you’re not too busy... We’re almost done with what we wanted from Professor Celia too.”

“Is there still something you needed from me?”

“Yes, as a continuation from earlier. If the circumstances suit you, would you

be willing to attend the meeting with the Beltrum Kingdom?”

“Me...?” Celia blinked.

“In exchange for returning Charles, I am thinking of demanding several conditions that would benefit Count Claire and the rest of your family.”

“Could I ask the reason why...?” Celia asked hesitantly, shocked at the sudden proposal.

“It hasn’t been officially announced to the Beltrum Kingdom, but even they’ve noticed that you joined the Restoration after being abducted from your wedding ceremony. Count Claire was also suspected of having assisted my escape from the capital. As long as we have Charles, they wouldn’t dare to touch Count Claire, but...”

If the situation changed, the Claire family could be in danger.

“At any rate, there’s no doubt that the Claire family has taken the brunt of all these events. The upper ranks of the Restoration have agreed that it would be proper to compensate him.”

That’s why there was nothing to worry about, Christina implied.

Celia bowed her head in deep sincerity. “Thank you for considering my family.”

“Not at all,” Christina said, continuing the discussion. “We’re still reviewing what kind of conditions should be requested, but...”

It was at that moment.

Boom.

An explosion roared, shaking the room.

“What was that? Some kind of magic training?”

Celia immediately went to look out the window, followed by the others in the room. The booming sounds continued even as they moved. The source of the sound appeared to be scattered in various directions, some near and some far.

“No, it’s too loud to be coming from the training grounds of the castle. I believe the sound is either coming from the castle or somewhere nearby,”

Charlotte guessed undauntedly, looking out the window.

After a short time, the sounds stopped.

“Excuse us for entering.”

Charlotte’s head guard Louise and the Beltrum sisters’ head guard Vanessa came into the room. They had both been waiting outside the door, so they naturally heard the noises as well. They both wore the same grim expressions.

“Can you tell what’s going on?” Charlotte asked Louise.

“No. I haven’t received any notice of an event that would create such noises either. The only option I can think of is magic training, but the sound came from too close by for that. I also saw something black fall from the sky through the window. I’ve sent my subordinates to check on the situation, and they’ll be back as soon as they know.”

“I see. In that case, shall we remain waiting in this mansion?”

“Yes. I’ve asked the guards who accompanied us to the mansion to station themselves outside. But please relocate to the safe room just in case.”

The safe room was a place for important figures to evacuate to in times of emergency. The level of refuge varied depending on the type of emergency likely to occur, but they were all made to be secure from outside attack.

This mansion was located on castle grounds, so the castle served as the evacuation point in true times of emergency. Thus, the safe room here was only a simple one.

“All right. Let’s group up with Lady Satsuki and the others first,” Charlotte immediately decided.

“We’re coming in, Char.”

Just then, with Satsuki in the lead, she, Miharu, Latifa, Sara, and Alma entered the room where they were holding their meeting. They must have heard the unnatural explosions and felt the abnormal air, as they all had worried looks on their faces. Sara and Alma even held their weapons just in case.

“You heard that loud noise earlier?” Satsuki asked.

“Yup. We don’t normally hear something like that around here, so we were shocked...” Miharu replied.

“We’re not sure of the situation either, but we were going to go to the safe room just in case. The knights have gone to check things out. Will you come with us?”

“I see... And yes, please.”

Satsuki exchanged a look with Miharu and nodded. At this point, there was still no clear danger, so there was no real sense of urgency yet, but...

“R-Reporting! A group of monsterlike creatures has descended upon the castle!”

“Wha...”

One of Charlotte’s knights came running in a panic, heightening the tension.

“Calm down. What do you mean by monsterlike creatures? Are they not goblins or orcs?” Louise asked her subordinate calmly. Powerful monsters like minotaurs had been commonplace in the Divine War that took place a thousand years ago, but goblins and orcs were the only monsters left in the modern era. There were some exceptions to that rule, but not even adventurers that worked in monster subjugation encountered them very often. Most of them reached retirement without ever seeing a different kind of monster.

“I only saw the knights fighting from afar, but their movements were much faster than those of a goblin or orc. I’ve never seen such a monster before. Their shapes were rather humanoid, but the ferocious expressions on their faces were monstrous. Some had gray skin while others had black skin,” the knight reported.

“Huh...?” Miharu looked shocked, and Satsuki noticed.

“I see. Any information about their numbers and locations?”

“I’m sorry, I prioritized my return to the mansion... However, they appear to have fallen across the grounds. There are battles taking place everywhere.”

Louise didn’t seem to have noticed the change in Miharu, so Satsuki waited for the subordinate to finish speaking. “What’s wrong, Miharu?” she asked,

bringing everyone's attention to her.

"Oh, umm. When I first came to this world, some strange monsters appeared on the outskirts of Amande. Haruto and Ai-chan exterminated them, but they weren't goblins or orcs. Maybe they're the same monsters that appeared here?"

"I remember seeing the same monsters during the attack on Amande. They weren't as strong as minotaurs, but they were fast and powerful," Celia recalled with a frown. "It would take at least a knight with enhanced physical abilities to take them on..."

"I was there too." Flora proceeded to give her account of what she had witnessed when she was kidnapped by Lucius in Amande.

"I see... We can't say for sure, but it's very likely that they're the same monsters. The knights have thankfully intercepted them, but any monsters they miss could slip through to this mansion. We will secure the surroundings, so please head to the safe room immediately, Your Highness," Louise urged.

"I understand," Charlotte said. She then turned to the group. "Princess Christina, Princess Flora, please come with me. Lady Satsuki and everyone else too."

"We will assist the guards outside," Sara offered. At present, she and Alma were the strongest in the mansion, but...

"Oh... That's..." Louise hesitated. She sparred with Sara and Alma on a daily basis so she knew their strength firsthand, but the two of them were still subjects of her guard.

"Alma and I have the role of protecting Miharuru and the others in Haruto's absence. There is no need to include us as subjects of protection. It'd be easier for us to move around outside than to have no information locked inside."

"Well, that's how it is. You don't need to worry about Sara and me."

Sara and Alma were both calm, as though they were familiar with such situations.

"..."

Satsuki looked like she was about to say something, but swallowed her words. *I will protect this mansion as well*—those were the words on the tip of her tongue, but she became uneasy. She understood her position as hero and feared her lack of combat experience would make her a hindrance.

Charlotte noticed Satsuki moving her mouth and purposefully gave Louise a push without looking at Satsuki. “Then we shall rely on you. There aren’t enough people in this mansion right now, and you two are probably the strongest with your enchanted swords.”

“Understood. We shall rely on you.” Louise bowed her head at Sara and Alma.

Sara turned around. “Latifa, you stay with Satsuki and Miharuru. We’re counting on you to protect them if the need arises.”

“Okay! Leave it to me!” Latifa nodded firmly in agreement.

“Umm, I’m going to go with the two of them,” Celia stated.

“Huh?”

Everyone looked at her in surprise.

“Monsters drop enchanted gems and disappear when defeated, and you need someone on that side to confirm they’re the same monsters that appeared in Amande last time. I can cast healing magic if needed, and it would be useful to have a sorcerer in the back line. I’ve also trained with Sara and Alma in team fighting before,” Celia said, explaining herself to convince Christina and Charlotte more than Sara and Alma.

“While we would be most grateful to have a sorcerer of your caliber on the back line... There’s no need to expose yourself to danger like that.” Charlotte gave Celia a searching look as though to confirm the truth of her thoughts. Nobles who didn’t pursue military careers still went through some form of combat training, so she knew that Celia had basic fighting skills.

Because of that, it wasn’t unusual for them to join the battlefield when needed—in fact, it was seen as one of the duties of the noble class. However, it depended on the time and place. In the current situation, there was only a slight chance of a monster being missed by the knights. It’d be preferable to keep a count’s daughter protected rather than to have her fight.

“I’d like to do what I can in Haruto’s absence,” Celia replied calmly and clearly. Her intentions were evident on her face—that she wanted to fight, that she didn’t always have to be protected, that Haruto could rely on her if he needed to.

“We’re familiar with Celia’s magic skills, and it would be most reassuring to have her support,” Sara added in approval.

“I see... In that case, it would be insensitive of me to stop you,” Charlotte accepted in a slightly envious tone, glancing at Christina. Although Celia was currently Rio’s assistant, she was still a noble of the Restoration. Christina’s opinion also mattered.

“I will leave it to your discretion, Professor,” Christina said, nodding.

“Thank you very much. Let’s do this, Sara, Alma.”

“Right.”

Sara and Alma were both warriors. Since they’d started living with Celia, they understood her intentions well—and so they nodded firmly.

Beside them, Louise was discussing how to proceed with Vanessa.

“Please go with the princesses and guard the safe room.”

“Understood.”

“In that case, everyone should head through this door that’s connected to the safe room. I will station several knights in this drawing room just in case.”

With the necessary arrangements done, Louise pointed to a different door from the exit. There were three safe rooms in the mansion, and one of them was located in the drawing room for the sake of important guests.

Thus, the residents of the mansion split into those taking refuge in the safe room and those going outside to stand guard.



Around the same time, a man floated in the skies above the capital, looking down at the castle grounds below him. It was the perpetrator behind the release of monsters across the grounds—Reiss himself. Less than an hour ago,

he had been observing the fierce battle between Rio and Saint Erica from afar, but he had used a disposable teleport crystal to move to the Galarc Castle in an instant.

At present, the noncombatants of the castle were panicking while the knights fought the revenants throughout the castle grounds.

The first movement after sending out my precious magic-sealing orbs and revenants. Hopefully it'll be enough to smoke someone out... Oh?

Reiss narrowed his eyes. His gaze fixed onto a single point from far above. It was the mansion Rio was gifted by Francois, and Celia, Sara, and Alma had just left through the front door.

It would've been problematic if they had shut themselves away inside the castle, so this is perfect. But it's best not to underestimate those girls when they're outside. I'll hold nothing back.

A jet-black shadow sprung from Reiss's feet, spreading across the blue sky. Five black orbs several meters in diameter appeared.

All five orbs rained down on Rio's mansion like meteorites. Each descent was accompanied by a booming roar, shaking the building.

That's all the revenants I have on hand. But I fear they won't last long against those girls—better call those guys over as quickly as possible.

Once he had watched the orbs land, Reiss took out a new teleport crystal and smirked, rising even higher into the sky.



After exiting the mansion, Sara walked along the outer wall of the building and moved on top of the roof for a better view. She strained her eyes to look over the area, checking that there were no monsters near the mansion.

“There are no monsters approaching the mansion as of yet. Though there are some people fighting here and there...”

She descended to the ground and reported what she saw to Louise and her knights, Celia, and Alma.

“Thank you. Though I would like to send assistance to our allies, we cannot

leave our stations. Let us prioritize the protection of this mansion.”

As long as there was a chance of monsters reaching the mansion, they couldn’t afford to leave the mansion guards shorthanded. It was a shame they could only watch their allies fight from afar, but it was the right tactical decision to make. They considered the option of bringing Miharu and the others to the castle, but it wouldn’t be wise to risk the safety of so many noncombatants while on the move.

“I will continue keeping watch from the roof.”

“I will assist.”

With that, Sara and Alma left to climb the roof. It was at that moment that the black orbs Reiss had released fell down nearby. Thundering shock waves surged upon them, blowing up a cloud of dirt.

“Wha...?!”

Their vision was suddenly stolen, leaving them speechless. Meanwhile, the dark surfaces of the orbs that had fallen started melting away. There were a total of five orbs, and they were less than a hundred meters away from the mansion. Twelve revenants leaped out of each orb.

“Kshaaah!”

Sixty revenants started running at Sara and the others before the mansion. There were only a few that could defend against such a surprise attack.

“A-Alma and I will stand at the front!”

“Everyone else, focus on protecting Celia and preventing any strays from getting into the mansion!”

The first to respond were Sara and Alma.

“*Duo Magi: Maius Terra Murum!!!*” Meanwhile, Celia cast a spell while touching the ground with both hands. Less than two seconds later, two walls of earth appeared between them and the revenants. The walls were each one meter thick, five meters wide, and ten meters tall. The purpose of setting up the obstacles wasn’t to stop the revenants’ approach, but to avoid a situation where they were overwhelmed by the enemy’s advantage in numbers. The

walls Celia created had a one-meter gap in between. This reduced the revenants' options to passing through the gap, going the long way around, or climbing over the tops of the walls.

Restricting the enemy's invasion route meant they could focus their firepower to where it was needed most. Being able to reduce the number of enemies to face at once was a huge benefit as well.

"Sara, Alma!" Celia yelled. "Please assume a formation surrounding me! Alma, you take the right side!"

"Got it!"

Sara and Alma understood Celia's intentions instantly and split up to the left and right. The revenants had chosen not to climb the walls, but to advance through the middle and around the sides. As a result...

"Tres Magi: Ignis lecit!"

"Haaah!"

"Hmph!"

The revenants coming from the middle, left, and right were met with powerful attacks from Celia, Sara, and Alma respectively.

"Grah!"

Three magic circles for sorcery spells appeared before Celia. One of them released a one-meter-wide fireball that blew back several of the revenants coming from the middle. The other two magic circles remained on standby beside her.

A lance of ice shot out of Sara's dagger and pierced through several bodies at once, while Alma's mace mowed down multiple enemies with a swing.

"They're the same monsters I saw in Amande! Their skin is hard and they're very tenacious, so be careful! The black ones move faster than the gray ones!" Celia shouted, warning Sara and the others about their characteristics. As though to prove her words, the enemies at the front staggered back to their feet even though their skin was now half-melted.

Out of the enemies Alma attacked, only the one at the very front died; the

others behind it were already getting back up on their feet. The revenants pierced through the abdomen by Sara's ice lance weren't killed by just that attack either, and were squirming to pull the lance out.

"So it seems...!"

Sara summoned a long blade of ice to enshroud her dagger, beheading the revenants that were impaled on the ice lance. They finally died after that, the bodies vanishing and leaving behind enchanted gems.

"How troublesome!" Alma brushed aside an enemy that threw itself at her and swung her mace at the new revenants charging. It seemed that a clear hit from her mace was enough to kill them, as the one sent flying soon vanished.

Celia also fired the second and third fireball shots she had on standby from her multicasting, finishing off the revenants she missed the first time.

"..." Louise and the other knights were speechless at how unfazed Celia and the others were at the sudden ambush. They understood one another's fighting styles and trained with each other every day, so there was nothing more reassuring. It was truly splendid.

In particular, Celia's first move with the earth wall was a fine tactic against the revenants. Her ability to cast multiple intermediate spells at a rapid speed and calmly observe the enemy's movements at the spur of the moment was incredibly impressive.

Louise looked at Celia in awe. "Defend Lady Celia so that her magic isn't obstructed! Don't overlook any monsters that run for the mansion!"

She pulled herself together and gave her subordinates orders. Only six or seven enemies had been defeated so far—the revenants were still advancing upon them.

"*Sextus Magi: Ictus Lancea!*" Celia seemed to get an idea from watching Sara's ice lances and used her magic to create thirty-six spears of ice at once. She saw how piercing once wasn't enough to kill and prepared multiple to make up for it.

The role of a sorcerer during group battles was to focus their firepower on the approaching enemies and reduce their numbers. Celia was trying to fulfill that

role, but casting thirty-six spells simultaneously was a challenge even for a royal sorcerer. Although it was basic magic, the fact Celia had accomplished such a feat in the midst of battle left the knights around her shocked.

Ignoring the knights' reaction, Celia continuously fired ice spears from the magic circle above her head. She stopped the revenants from approaching through the gap between the walls one after another.

Calm down and observe carefully... A sorcerer on the back line needs to have a broad view of the enemy's movements and the ability to make preemptive moves.

Celia took a deep breath and focused on staying calm. Of course, she was nervous about fighting for real—in fact, she was terrified.

However, Celia knew firsthand what it was like to be a burden on the battlefield. The frustration of being immobilized by fear. She recalled the events leading up to her arrival at the Restoration.



In the many battles that occurred while escorting Christina to Rodania, she had watched on while Rio, Sara, Alma, and Orphia did all the fighting. Despite having the ability to help as a sorcerer, she was more useless on the battlefield than she could have ever imagined.

That's why ever since she joined the Restoration, Celia had begun to learn how to use her magic in real battles. With the assistance of Sara's and Gouki's groups, she began training regularly. The result of that was now blooming before everyone here.

"The people around Sir Amakawa are truly amazing..." Louise muttered in astonishment. The flashy magic spells made Celia's power easy to identify, but Sara's and Alma's efforts were also eye opening.

Sara was fighting both with speed and the number of her hits. She moved swiftly and acrobatically, confusing the revenants with a mix of martial arts and ice-cold dagger swings. The daggers she held in each hand slashed at the revenants' hard bodies faster than the eye could follow.

Meanwhile, Alma fought impressively. It was evident that her physical body enhancement was the source of her strength, but it was hard to believe such a small and delicate body had so much physical power packed within it. She swung her heavy-looking mace, killing a revenant with each hit.

Their battle styles were different, but both Sara and Alma had stable ways of fighting. They were cleanly keeping the revenants on both sides at bay.

Only a third of the enemies had been defeated so far, but at this rate, the extermination would conclude without a hitch. That's what Celia and the others thought as they fought.



The group that had evacuated to the safe room could tell that the battle had started outside. The sixteen-meter-squared room, connected to the drawing room by a single door, had no windows. Miharu, Satsuki, Latifa, Christina, Flora, and Charlotte were inside the safe room, Vanessa was in the corridor leading to the drawing room, and two of Charlotte's knights were in the drawing room.

Once they started hearing the sounds of a fierce battle taking place, they all

stopped speaking. The sound of Celia's magic and the revenants' screeches echoed through the mansion walls. It was clear that a life-threatening battle was taking place.

Everyone's fighting outside right now...

Affected by the tension in the air, Satsuki fell silent with a meek look. She was thinking about those fighting outside, and...

I'm taking shelter in a safe room. Even though I'm the hero.

...herself.

Sara and Alma were both younger than her. Celia was older, but she was as delicate as a younger girl. Yet all three were fighting outside while she was taking refuge in the safe room.

Am I really okay with that? Shouldn't I fight as well? Sara, Alma, and Celia are all my precious friends... I'm on good terms with Louise and the knights too...

Right now, Satsuki was regretting how she hadn't offered to stand guard outside with the others. They weren't certain that the monsters had approached earlier, so she thought it would be better to stay by Miharuru's side—but that may have been an excuse for her fear.

Ever since coming to this world, she had been working hard at her spear training. She had recently started sparring with Sara and the others, but those matches weren't enough to prepare her for duels to the death. She had merely participated with the same mindset as participating in a sports tournament.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the safety of the castle had clouded her view, making it hard for her to feel the imminent danger. Though she understood that war could start at any moment, she had averted her eyes from what that meant, training with a vacant mind.

But at this moment, Satsuki was keenly aware of the lives at risk outside. She wondered if it would have been better for her to fight as well.

My friends are fighting right nearby, yet I'm hiding in a safe refuge... Even though I'm the one with the hero powers. How can I face them all after the fight ends? I have no right to be the hero.

Whether she liked it or not, her close friends were risking their lives beside her. To put it simply, the warlike atmosphere was affecting her emotions.

The last time she had been in a life-threatening situation was when she reunited with Miharuru at the banquet and invaders attacked the gathering. Rio's assistance resolved the situation in less than a minute, so although it left a bad aftertaste, she hadn't felt the tense atmosphere for nearly as long as this.

The sounds of fighting outside could still be heard even now.

"Are you okay, Satsuki?"

Miharuru had noticed her pale expression. She called out to her worriedly.

"Say, Miharuru..." Satsuki started, making up her mind.

"You look like you want to go out there and join the fight."

Charlotte guessed first, beating Satsuki to the punch. She seemed to be opposed to letting Satsuki outside, as she was sighing heavily as she spoke.

It was at that moment that the sounds from outside stopped.



"Have you found out anything new?"

King Francois was in the temporary command post set up in the hanging gardens. With all the monsters invading the castle grounds, the rooftop garden was the best place to look over the situation and give orders.

The hanging gardens were normally off-limits to everyone except the royal family and their personally invited guests, but it was currently packed with a flurry of military personnel. Aerial knights patrolled the skies above on griffins, watching for any kind of aerial attack.

"Only one type of monster descended during the attack. They all possess the strength of a knight with their physical abilities enhanced."

"The number of invading monsters is estimated to be a few hundred."

"Most are in combat with the knights outside, but some have snuck into the castle. The ones that were spotted were eliminated, but we've allocated some people to search the interior to be safe."

A number of knights were giving their status reports to Francois, who was heavily protected by several guards. Francois was nodding along to the reports when five new black orbs fell from the sky, dropping to the ground near Rio's mansion with a booming crash.

"What was that sound?! Don't tell me...!"

Had more monsters appeared? Francois quickly turned in the direction of the sound, but he was unable to see Rio's mansion from his current position.

Shortly after, one of the griffins that had been circling the skies descended to the garden. The aerial knight riding it gave his report in a hurry. "R-Reporting in! A huge number of monsters have appeared near Sir Amakawa's mansion!"

"What? That's not good. Send two platoons of the reserve aerial knights at once. Tell them to provide support from the skies if possible. Protect the important figures inside the mansion! For detailed orders, do as Charlotte says—she's probably over there herself," Francois said, giving hurried orders with a glance at the aerial knights on standby in the hanging gardens.

One platoon consisted of four knights, so two made eight. At present, there were forty aerial knights on standby in the rooftop garden as reserve forces, so a fifth of them would be mobilizing.

"Right away!" The knight that made the report pulled on his reins, directing his griffin towards where the aerial knights were waiting.

Just what is happening right now?

Francois glared at the skies with a grim expression. The clouds in the blue sky appeared as peaceful as ever. The only other objects in the air were the griffins carrying the aerial knights.

The knights in the air had been searching for a while now. The griffins they rode on maintained an altitude of ten to several tens of meters, similar to that of a regular bird seen in everyday life.

If a griffin were to ascend as far as it could by itself, its maximum limit would be around two hundred meters. In modern Earth terms, it would be the height of a sixty-floor building, and the aerial knights searching the skies naturally searched all the way up to there too. However, they were yet to find anything

to report on.

All they knew at this point was that the monsters had been sealed in some kind of orb that fell from the sky.

The attack on Amande was also said to have been quite strange, but I've never heard of monsters attacking in this form before. The black orbs that contained the monsters... Could they be some kind of magical artifact?

If so, that would mean there was a human behind this attack. In other words, there was a clear goal behind the black orbs that were sent into the castle grounds.

There's someone either too high up to be seen with the naked eye, or hiding behind the clouds... Or perhaps they fired the magic artifacts into the castle grounds from afar? At any rate, there's nothing that can be done without any proof. How frustrating... Francois thought with a furrowed brow.

"Follow me."

He wanted to see Rio's mansion with his own eyes. The guards surrounding him followed as he marched towards somewhere that could overlook the mansion.



A mere two or three minutes later, beside Rio's mansion...

"Haaah!" Sara created ice lances out of the ground, stopping the revenants in their tracks. She then approached them faster than the eye could follow, kicking them flying and slicing off their necks with her daggers.

"Hmph! Hah!" At the same time, Alma swung her mace with a powerful ease that was unbelievable for her small frame, sending the enemy flying. She moved in light-footed leaps, cleanly eliminating all the revenants that were rushing at her.

Meanwhile, Celia was firing the magic ice lances she had prepared in the air, killing the monsters that slipped past the walls she had put up as an obstruction.

The sixty revenants that originally fell had already been reduced to fewer than

ten. The landform Celia had created at the beginning played a big part in that.

“Gaaah!”

The revenants’ eyes glinted with an eerie light. There was no sign of any rationality within them as they screeched in anger, enraged by how their attack was being thwarted.

However, no matter how passionately they screamed, their numbers continued dwindling. Their forces were clearly declining by the second.

“I’m almost at the end!”

“I’m on my last enemy now!”

“There are no more monsters between the walls either!”

With no more monsters coming around the sides, Sara, Alma, and Celia each reported on their situations in turn. Things went smoothly after that—Celia finished her group first, followed by Sara and Alma a short moment later.

“That seems like the last of it...” Sara checked behind the wall and reported. She then returned to where Celia and the others were with Alma.

Louise commended them gratefully. “I can’t believe the three of you cleaned up so many monsters in such a short time. It was splendid work. I’m sorry we were only able to watch on...”

“No, it was very reassuring having the knights at our backs,” Sara replied with a smile.

“I was also able to concentrate on my magic. Oh, by the way, Alma.”

Celia called out to Alma like she had just remembered something.

“Yes? What is it?” Alma asked, puzzled.

“Could you break down the dirt walls with your mace?”

Although they had been necessary to block the enemy’s advance, they couldn’t just leave them standing there like this. Celia looked in the direction where the revenants had come from. The huge dirt walls she put up at the start of the battle towered tall, blocking the castle behind them.

She had used an immense amount of magic essence to make them as sturdy

as possible, and now that some time had passed since putting them up, the only way of removing them was to break them. Only with spirit arts could the ground be manipulated freely to lower them.

However, Celia had specifically asked for Alma's mace because of the knights' presence. They didn't know about spirit arts, so the weapon provided the convenient cover of an enchanted-sword-like ability that could control the ground.

"Yes, I can. They ruin the view, so I'll turn it back to how it was now."

"Thanks. Sorry for the trouble."

"Not at all. It made the fight much easier," Alma said, then approached the walls.

"The battle might be ongoing in other areas, so don't let your guards down. I'll scout the area from the rooftop."

"Please do."

Sara leaped up to the rooftop lightly.

The best moment to launch a surprise attack was when the opponent had their guards lowered. In other words, the moment a battle had finished was the easiest time to make a successful ambush. Her actions were made in understanding of this.

However, veteran mercenaries were well aware that experienced soldiers didn't let their guards down easily. That's why they planned the most meticulous and cunning strategies, watching for the best moment to attack and adapting themselves to changing situations.

"Some knights are approaching this way on griffins," Sara called from above, pointing at the sky. The gaze of the party followed her hand.

Two groups of griffin-riding knights scouting the situation from above had been circling the skies above for a while now, but the approaching troops consisted of two small squads, totaling eight people. Their approach in the mansion's direction made them all the more eye-catching.

"They must be the reinforcements. It's about time too," Louise answered

loudly enough for Sara to hear, then turned to a female knight beside her. “Hey, go give an update to the princess.”

The arrival of reinforcements made their defenses seem adequate, softening the tension that was hanging in the air. But then...

“Umm... Is that squad descending rapidly over there also on our side? There’s quite a lot of them, and they’re coming in from a rather elevated altitude...”

Sara pointed farther up in the sky with a dubious look. While the aerial knights were flying in from an altitude of several tens of meters or so, the new griffin squad was coming in from several hundred meters up.

However, they appeared to be free-falling with gravity, as their distant figures were rapidly increasing in size. Sara had only spotted them early because she was using physically enhanced vision to watch for more monster orbs falling down.

“How odd...” Louise stared at the distant troops in the sky.

There were fifty griffins, which amounted to three squadrons of the aerial knights—a considerably large force. Why would such a large number of troops be falling at a speed they couldn’t land safely at?

“Augendae Corporis. That’s...”

Louise immediately used magic to enhance her vision, straining her eyes to see them clearly. Then, she spotted the soldiers wearing uniforms clearly different to those of the aerial knights of the Galarc Kingdom.

The unknown soldiers started to chant some kind of spell on their griffins. Magic circles appeared one after another before them.

“They’re not allies! Those aerial knights are not from our kingdom!”

“Alma, get ready to defend!”

Louise and Sara both yelled with looks of horror. At the same time, a barrage of light bullets rained down on them.

Chapter 3: The Heavenly Lions

The Heavenly Lions. A veteran mercenary group once led by the late Lucius Orgueil.

At present, fifty mercenaries wearing the group uniform were flying in towards the Galarc Castle. They descended rapidly until they reached an altitude of two hundred meters, where they started firing bullets of light towards the ground.

Each light bullet was a few centimeters in diameter. They were actually bullets of magic energy, but they could be compared to hard orbs just under one kilogram heavy being fired at a speed of three hundred kilometers per hour. Such an attack was being rapid-fired by fifty people at once.

The light bullets became a rain, closing in on the ground in an instant. Their targets were Sara on the roof, Celia and the others around the mansion, and the two platoons of aerial knights Francois had dispatched. They split into groups proportionate to the number of targets.

“Haaah!”

Sara and Alma both summoned a huge barrier of magic essence, blocking the bullets from reaching them. Sara focused on minimizing the damage to the mansion, while Alma protected the others around her. Their defenses worked successfully, but the aerial knights were helpless against the attacks from above.

“Gah?!”

“Gwargh!”

The knights and griffins let out screams of pain as they were hit by the attack.

The knights that were critically hit lost consciousness, their griffins turning violent from the pain. While they had safety tethers, they started falling out of their saddles one by one. By the time the attacks stopped, there was no one left flying. It was pandemonium.

“Ngh...”

Sara and Alma were unable to do anything but watch on. The attacks were incessant, leaving them no choice but to focus on keeping their barrier up. During that time, the assailants came within landing distance of the ground.

Tch, all the top-priority targets are unharmed. Mister Reiss said there was a high chance they'd block the first attack, but at least one could have gone down and made things easier for us...

One of the mercenaries of the Heavenly Lions, Arein, clicked his tongue in annoyance. But he immediately switched gears.

“Follow the plan! Lucci, your squad takes the outside! Ven, your squad heads inside the mansion! My squad will be the commando unit. We'll stop the castle knights from approaching by foot. Move out!” he ordered his comrades around him.

“Right!”

The mercenaries moved swiftly. Thirty of them continued the attack from above with Arein, while the others split into two groups to descend to the ground. Eleven mercenaries and Lucci landed near the dirt walls Celia had put up earlier, while Ven and the remaining seven closed in on the front door of the mansion.

“Ngh, the enemies are getting inside...!”

The number of assailants firing bullets from above had decreased, but the fierce barrage still continued. Sara had no choice but to continue holding her barrier.

They're completely ignoring me... Are they after the princesses?! This is bad!

Sara guessed at the mercenaries' aim and called out to the others below. “I'm going to support the others inside! Take care of the outside!”

“Go, Sara!” Celia replied immediately. The rain of bullets tried to stop Sara from moving. However...

With their forces split up, the focus on me has lessened. If it's like this...!

While keeping her barrier maintained, Sara summoned several spears of ice

around her. Then, she fired them to the sides, sending them to the sky in a curving arc. She controlled their trajectory with spirit arts, aiming for the mercenaries attacking her.

“Tch.”

The mercenaries being targeted circled in the air, evading the lances. In doing so, their attack on Sara faltered.

“Now!”

Sara spotted that slim opening and used the chance to jump down to the ground floor, rushing into the mansion through a window.



While Sara was returning to the mansion, the mercenaries under the command of Lucci reached the ground.

“Guh, they’re on the other side of my dirt wall...!” Celia cried in frustration.

The moment of landing was a big chance to counterattack, but they had landed out of line of sight of her to avoid her magic. Their knowledge of how to handle the terrain in battle, their carefully planned ambush strategy—it was clear they were a much more formidable enemy than the revenants that had attacked earlier.

“Quattuor Magi: Magicae Displodo.”

Celia fixed her gaze on the two walls she had created and chanted an attack spell. *Magicae Displodo* was a spell that fired a powerful magic cannon, making it extremely lethal. The possibility of casualties flashed through Celia’s mind.

...This isn’t the time to be holding back!

If she hesitated here, someone among them would definitely die. She manipulated her magic as fast as she could, spending three seconds to create four magic circles before her. However, she didn’t fire them immediately.

“Potentia Incantatio! Superfundo!” she shouted.

The glow of the magic circles increased in luminosity. The next moment, four powerful bursts of light were fired from the circles like cannonballs.

They were, of course, aimed at the two giant dirt walls Celia had created. The tip of the light collided with a loud explosion. By controlling the trajectory of the spells, she made sure to break the walls down thoroughly. In reality, the enemies on the other side of the wall were buried alive by the rubble.

“Ooh!” the knights cheered.

But immediately after...

Boom.

The fallen rubble was blown away with great force.

“Wh...Wha?!”

A torrent of darkness came from the other side of the wall, swallowing all four of Celia’s magic bursts in a violent storm.

“Guh...!”

Everyone recoiled at the shock wave—except for Alma. She moved the barrier she had placed over their heads to her front, blocking the advancing wind. The flying rubble collided with the wall, but it disintegrated on impact.

The wind eventually stopped, leaving a cloud of dust that obstructed their view. The mercenaries wouldn’t be able to see them either.

“Ha! Ha! Ha ha!” From the other side of where the wall had stood was a man cackling in gleeful laughter. It was the larger man in the group, Lucci.

“Damn, this sword is great! The commander’s memento is amazing!”

He looked down at the black sword in his hand with a smirk, a crazed look in his eyes.

“Ngh... Alma, I’m going to keep the enemy in check and secure a line of sight. Take down the barrier to the front.”

“Right!”

“*Vortex.*” Celia used a new spell to clear their vision and keep the enemies in check. A swirling whirlwind was released from the magic spell, blowing away the dust cloud while moving forward. However—

“Just try me!” Another shock wave of darkness blew at them violently. Lucci

had swung the sword in his hand, mowing down the whirlwind magic Celia had used.

At the same time, their vision rapidly cleared. All the rubble had landed by then, so the two sides could finally see each other properly. Celia's side was met with the sight of twelve mercenaries in black combat uniforms.

"Wh-What was that...?" Celia trembled uneasily.

"All hands, draw your swords! Enhance your physical abilities!"

Louise drew her sword and immediately assumed combat readiness. She chanted the spell to enchant her physical ability, and her six subordinates followed suit.

It was a bad move to act with no idea of the enemy's position, but now that the view had cleared up, the battle could start at any moment.

"I'll take over the barrier casting, Alma. *Magicae Murum*," Celia chanted in a hurry. Her barrier overlapped with Alma's from the inside, creating a wall against physical and magical attacks.

Maintaining a barrier limited the caster's movements, so it was better for a sorcerer like her to handle the spell over the highly mobile Alma.

The attacks from above had ceased after Sara slipped inside the mansion, but there was no telling when they could start again. She had to keep the barrier up just in case—this was what it meant to have control of the air.

"Please." Alma nodded and canceled her own barrier. She advanced forward while glaring at Lucci and the other mercenaries with their weapons held ready. Yet despite the critically tense atmosphere, Lucci burst into a hearty laughter for no identifiable reason.

"Ha ha ha!"

It was so creepy, Celia and the others frowned in response.

"Celia, have you realized it?" Alma whispered to Celia without moving her gaze.

"Realized what...?"

“That man with the black sword is part of the gang that attacked us on the way to Rodania with the princess.” Alma had faced him herself, so she remembered him clearly.

“Ah...!” Celia gasped.

“Ha! Looks like you’ve finally caught on to us. We even wore our squad uniforms to make it easy for you. Hey, let’s continue from where we left off.”

Lucci pointed his sword at Alma without any attempt at hiding his identity. Alma had won last time, but his haughty attitude seemed to imply he thought his victory would be certain this time.

What kingdom is that aerial knight uniform of? Could it be a mercenary squad uniform? Either way, why would they attack our castle in clearly identifiable uniforms...?

Without knowing anything about him, Louise came up with her own guess. Like the Galarc Knights, this group of people wore a combat uniform of the same design. But that aside—

“That brat with the mace and the tiny sorcerer casting the barrier are our targets, right, Lucci?” a mercenary beside Lucci asked. There was no one else among them that Alma and Celia recognized the face of.

“Yeah, exactly like the briefing. You guys aim for the sorcerer. Take care of the extras around her as well. The mace-wielding brat would be too much for you, so she’s mine.”

“Just because you have the commander’s sword now...” a disgruntled voice mumbled. The other mercenaries looked at Lucci’s black enchanted sword with discontent.

“I was the only one that matched it in compatibility, remember?” Lucci said boastfully. The jet-black enchanted sword that Lucius used was powerful. They had just witnessed its power moments ago. It was understandable for Lucci to be excited about fighting, but—

“Tch... Don’t forget that taking just one target hostage is enough to accomplish the mission,” one man warned Lucci, reminding him not to forget about fulfilling the assignment in his enthusiasm.

“Of course. Why else are we here?”

Lucci glared at the man with a frown. They were here for revenge on the man who killed their captain.

“Let’s finish this before the enemy reinforcements arrive. Follow my lead.”

He pulled himself together and returned his gaze to Alma, adopting a battle stance.

“Celia.”

Sensing the enemy’s movements, Alma called out to Celia while moving to stand in front of her. They planned a strategy using the least amount of words possible.

“I know.”

Celia had a barrier held up overhead and to her front, but she removed the one to the front. Alma then walked forward.

Next, Louise and the other knights stood before Celia. Celia adjusted the shape of the barrier to create a dome shape with an opening only to the front of the knights.

Once Alma saw that, she slammed the head of her mace on the ground. A thick wall rose from the ground behind her, stopping at a height of one meter. It partially blocked the section of the barrier Celia had left open before the knights.

“...”

They had already confirmed that both sides could make wide-ranged attacks. It would be reckless to charge forward, so they had no choice but to glare warily at each other.

However, the more time passed, the more of a disadvantage the attackers would be in. The silence would soon be broken.

“Let’s go!”

“Come at me!”

Lucci and Alma yelled at the same time. Lucci burst into a run towards Alma,

followed by the other mercenaries one beat later.

They're fast...

That kind of speed wasn't achievable with magically enhanced physical abilities alone: they had to be using enchanted swords that could reinforce their physical bodies as well. Lucci's movements in particular were something special; he was considerably faster than the others.

However, Alma had her physical abilities and body enhanced as well, which was why she was able to capture their initial movements accurately.

This formation was the right choice after all.

The knights on their sides could only enhance their physical abilities, so they wouldn't have been able to keep up with that speed. Last time she faced Lucci, Arein, and Ven, the three of them possessed enchanted swords that could enhance their physical bodies. Fearing that the other mercenaries were in possession of similar weapons, she had asked the knights to stand back.

"Hah!" Alma charged straight forward, and in the next moment, Lucci was within her reach.

However, the converse also applied to Lucci. Their weapons clashed together with a screeching ring. Alma tried to push forward with her dwarven strength, but Lucci had more arm strength than she'd expected. In fact, he was clearly stronger than the last time they fought. She could tell he had a powerful physical body enhancement applied through Lucius's enchanted sword.

"Guh..."

"Damn, where does that animal strength come from?!"

Alma's physical strength won by a faint margin, pushing Lucci backwards. It wasn't enough to knock him off-balance, however, as he immediately charged forward once again.

"You're taking too long, Lucci!" While he was pushed back, two mercenaries passed by on each side of him, slashing at Alma.

"Hey, you two! That's my prey!" Lucci growled.

It doesn't matter how many there are of you. No one's getting past me! Alma

slammed her mace on the ground, unaffected by the number of opponents. The ground cracked open, sending a shock wave of stones and pebbles flying.

“Gah!”

“Out of my way!”

The two mercenaries stepped back and Lucci charged forward in their place.

“I won’t let you!” Alma slammed her mace against the ground before her, using magic essence to create spikes of earth, similar to those of a hedgehog.

“Ooh, how scary.” Dreary darkness flowed out of Lucci’s sword. In one swing forward, he flattened the spikes of earth, then in another swing back, he swung at Alma, who was no longer obstructed.

“Ha!” Alma raised her mace reflexively, blocking Lucci’s sword.

“This brat is my prey! You all attack the others from the sides!” Lucci yelled at the other mercenaries.

“Tch!” There were some mercenaries who frowned unhappily, but they swallowed their pride and prioritized the goal. They split up as ordered, passing by Alma to aim for Celia and the knights.

“Now!”

“Ignis Iecit!”

“Fulgur Sphera!”

At Louise’s order, two of the knights cast attack magic through the gap in the wall before them. They weren’t sorcerers, so their magic ability was limited, but they could still use lower-grade spells—and when it came to battle with humans, lower-grade attack magic was more than enough of a threat.

While the barrier protected them from outside attacks, there was no way of attacking from inside the barrier. That was why Celia had purposefully left the front of the barrier open and Alma had built a low wall to act as an obstruction.

Like this, Alma could stop the enemies from advancing through the middle, while Louise and the knights could stop any enemies trying to go around with orb-style spells. This was the plan Celia had come up with on the spot earlier.

However...

“Tch.”

Orb-style attack spells had high lethality even at lower grades, but the tradeoff for their power was a slower projectile speed. This made it difficult to aim at experienced soldiers with bodies boosted by their enchanted swords. The mercenaries fell back and went around the points of impact, negating the spells.

“Photon Projectilis!”

Two other knights aimed for the moment the mercenaries evaded the spells. Photon bullets had less power than orb-style spells, but as bullet-style spells, they had much faster projectile speed. Light-type bullets were the fastest of them all, but...

“How annoying.”

“They’re not the pushovers I expected. That’s some skill.”

“Don’t underestimate your enemies! They’re still elite knights.”

The mercenaries continued to evade the magic with ease. They even had the leisure to complain while leaping about.

Meanwhile, Alma’s mace collided with Lucci’s sword in a life-or-death struggle. “Take that!”

Lucci was evidently stronger than the last time they fought. His basic techniques hadn’t improved, but his physical abilities had increased dramatically. Alma had slightly more physical strength, but they were on par in terms of speed. On top of that, Lucci was clearly more experienced in fighting against other people. All his mercenary experience wasn’t just for show.

I’m meant to be luring the majority of the enemies too! Alma gritted her teeth, frustrated that she was only able to distract a single enemy. It was times like this where her lack of combat experience left her disadvantaged.

“Ha. I see your friends have focused on going on the defense to buy you time. But they won’t hold on for long,” Lucci taunted, seeing through the panic in Alma’s expression while swinging his sword.

“Guh...”

The situation wasn't looking good. The assailants were all skilled mercenaries from the renowned Heavenly Lions. Though they couldn't advance with the barrier and spell barrage hindering them, they weren't about to retreat quietly.

“Photon Projectilis.”

The mercenaries started counterattacking as they evaded. Their target was, of course, the unprotected front of the barrier.

The low wall Alma had built provided good cover from projectiles, but there were gaps for the knights to expose the upper halves of their bodies and cast their magic. The photon bullets slipped through those gaps and rebounded around the inside of the barrier.

“Ngh. Lady Celia, stay down.”

“O-Okay.” At Louise's order, Celia bent over.

The most important factor of a magic duel was cover. The risk of being hit was reduced by the amount of cover they had while casting.

“Keep your heads low and the spells coming! Cast until you run out of magic essence!”

“Yes, captain!”

The knights crouched down and continued casting spells over the wall, but their accuracy naturally dropped with their heads so low. That made it easier for the mercenaries to move.

“All right, get around them!”

“A barrier of this size has gotta be a burden to hold up!”

“Break it with your attacks!”

Eventually, the mercenaries surrounded them on all sides and began attacking the barrier.

“Ugh...” Panic filled Celia's face as she watched the malicious assailants attack her barrier with their magic and weapons.

There was no doubt her barrier was a powerful defense method capable of

blocking all attacks and keeping out intruders, but it also consumed a lot of magic essence. Just having it up consumed essence, but blocking attacks consumed even more. The essence consumption went up exponentially as the area of the barrier increased, and the barrier's strength weakened the less essence there was remaining.

If she wanted to minimize her essence consumption, she had to shrink her barrier while keeping it sturdy enough to withstand the enemy attacks—but doing so was no simple feat. Most people had no choice but to use all their magic essence just to make the barrier big enough. That's why barriers normally consumed a lot more essence than was necessary. It wasn't practical to use the spell on the battlefield unless the attack was unavoidable.

Celia had much more essence than the average sorcerer, but even she would struggle with over ten mercenaries surrounding her barrier. They were basically on board a sinking ship right now—and the moment she ran out of essence, the enemies would wipe them out instantly.

I-It's okay... I have the essence in the spirit stone Rio gave me, and they've caused this big of a fuss already. Reinforcements will be here soon. I just have to hold on...!

Rio wasn't here right now... That fact weighed on her heavily. But in order to prove she was fine without him, she had to fight. Celia clutched the spirit stone she received from Rio and frantically told herself that it'd be okay.

Alma could see Celia holding the spirit stone as she fought and came to a decision.

There's no other choice...!

She still had one ace up her sleeve, and she had hoped to keep it hidden—no, her village had ordered her to keep it hidden at all costs. But if she didn't use it here, the situation would become irredeemable.

Ifritah!

Alma yelled the name of her mid-class contract spirit in her heart. A giant lion-shaped beast appeared out of thin air.

Ifritah immediately charged at the mercenaries surrounding the barrier.



Some time before Alma summoned Ifritah...

In the hanging gardens of the castle, King Francois was aware that the newest assailants were humans. In fact, he was irately watching things take place from afar in the very present.

It was clear that the battles on the ground were not going well. Several people had entered the mansion, and the enemy griffin riders were circling the skies, preventing any reinforcements from reaching the area.

“The nerve of these people...”

Francois gritted his teeth to stifle his anger and frustration. Losing his composure wouldn't help the situation, and above all, he had his dignity as the king not to do something as unbecoming as breaking down and shouting before his vassals.

Besides, he had already given orders to deal with the situation. The knights on the ground were still engaged in combat with revenants, but his aerial knights were heading for the mansion.

However, the revenants that preceded the mercenary attack had created much chaos in the castle, and support teams were focused on transporting the injured. One-third of the aerial knights were stationed in the castle, but out of the six hundred knights available, only one hundred could be sent as reinforcements.

Despite that, there was still a considerable number of troops flying towards Rio's mansion at once. Arein and his subordinates had no choice but to intercept them, sparing Celia and the knights on the ground from an aerial assault. But that was the extent of their effect.

There were thirty mercenaries in Arein's group, and a number of them had descended to stop any reinforcements from approaching on foot. In terms of numbers, the Galarc Kingdom side had the overwhelming advantage, but what was most burdensome was the supporting fire that occasionally rained down on the aerial knights from far above.

On top of that, the mercenaries that had descended to the ground had

released their griffins back up to the sky to assist the others. Because of that, the Galarc side was yet to assume control of the air.

Sandwiched between fire from above and griffin attacks from below, the aerial knights were forced into combat with Arein and his squad. Francois could see they were struggling to make a proper advance.

“Your Majesty! The assailants have been identified! The emblem on their uniforms is of a mercenary group called the Heavenly Lions.”

A soldier ran up to where Francois was being protected by his own knights and sorcerers. Finally, the identity of their enemies had been revealed.

“What?” Francois furrowed his brow.

They were a famous mercenary group, so it wasn’t that he hadn’t heard of the name before. What had actually caught his attention was their leader, the man who was killed by Rio for being an enemy to his parents. He was also the culprit behind Christina and Flora’s recent abduction.

“Hmm...”

Right now, those mercenaries were raiding the mansion of their leader’s killer. Inside the mansion were the two princesses that were previously abducted.

Francois thought hard about why the Heavenly Lions would launch an attack like this.



Meanwhile, Ven’s squad had just charged into the front door of the mansion. The mercenaries opened each door as they went past, checking the interiors.

“It’s Sara! Please open up!”

Sara had the advantage of knowing the mansion’s layout, so she went straight for the window of the room connected to the safe room. However, she knew she could be mistaken for an enemy if she charged straight in, so she knocked on the window in a hurry.

The knights inside the room had been watching what was going on outside, so while they were surprised by Sara’s sudden appearance, they immediately let

her inside.

Standing before the corridor leading to the safe room were Satsuki with her spear-shaped Divine Arms, Latifa with her dagger, and Vanessa. Satsuki and Latifa had been inside the safe room, but decided to join the defense efforts when the battle started.

“Excuse me...”

Fearing the enemies’ detection of her location, Sara kept her voice low as she slipped inside. She held a finger up to her lips, signaling to the others to keep quiet.

“Sara.”

They could see the battle outside from the window, so they must be aware of the situation already. Satsuki called Sara’s name quietly, a fretful look on her face. Just then, Miharuru, Christina, Flora, and Charlotte emerged from the safe room.

“There are intruders in the mansion. Not monsters...but people.”

“R-Right. What do we do?”

Hearing that their opponents were humans made Satsuki’s expression even more uneasy. The others were similarly nervous. The battle had just started outside.

“I will defeat them.”

Sara looked between the entrance to the room, the window, and the direction of the safe room. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she steeled herself. “Everyone here will continue to protect this room. I will defeat the enemies in the mansion.”

She started for the door leading to the outside corridor.

“I-I’ll go too,” Satsuki offered in a fluster. However...

“Your spear will be difficult to use in a corridor. If you wish to fight, you should do so in this room. I saw a total of eight intruders. Please stay in this room and fight any that I miss.”

The enemy is probably aiming for this room, Sara's words implied.

"I understand..." Satsuki nodded, struggling to swallow.

"There's a chance of being attacked from both ends of the corridor. We will accompany you," one of the two knights under Louise offered, drawing her sword. They were equipped with short swords suitable for fighting indoors, so they would have no trouble in the corridor.

"Please," Sara said, giving a short reply. She looked at the entrance of the safe room. "Latifa, please remain here. If the enemies enter, you and Satsuki will be the final line of defense."

"Okay..."

Latifa nodded with a stiff expression. It was at that moment that the battle outside the mansion commenced. The fierce sound of clashing weapons reached their ears.

"Once we leave the room, lock it and stay back from the door. Be careful of the window too. Now..."

With those parting words to Satsuki, Sara exchanged looks with the two female knights. They all nodded at each other, then went out to the corridor.

The meeting room was at the end of the first-floor corridor. Since the corridor connected to both the entrance hall and the dining hall, it was possible for enemies to come from both directions.

"Let's split into two groups to protect the corridor," Sara suggested.

"There they are!"

"At the back of the first floor!"

Mercenaries appeared out of a room along the corridor towards the entrance. They had been moving in pairs, so they shouted loudly enough for the other intruders in the mansion to hear.

"I'll deal with them. Protect the side leading to the dining hall!"

As soon as she finished speaking, Sara charged towards the two mercenaries.

"It's the silver-haired dagger girl! Be careful!"

“Her enchanted sword gives her the power to control water. Sounds fun!”

The two mercenaries shared information with each other as they drew their swords and stepped forward to meet her. They took a diagonal position to each other as they closed the distance. There was no hesitation in their movements—it was clear they were veteran fighters.

They had probably received an explanation from Arein, Lucci, and Ven, who had previously fought with Sara. She had used water spirit arts to defeat the three of them, so they naturally assumed her enchanted sword could control water.

They know about me? Then...!

Meanwhile, at this point, Sara was still unaware of her opponent’s identity. She was confused to hear that they had information about her, but she wasn’t about to let that affect her movements. In fact, if they knew of it already, there was no need to hide it.

“Haaah!” A few steps before the two came within reach, she swung one of her daggers to release an opening slash of water. The power was suppressed out of consideration of the mansion interior, but it was strong enough to feel like a whip strike against an unguarded human.

“Whoa, there!” The two mercenaries evaded the water slashes by sliding under them.

So fast!

Sara could tell their reaction speeds were faster than that of a knight with physically enhanced abilities. The intruders inside the mansion were equipped with shorter swords than those outside, but they were most certainly enchanted swords with physical body enchantments.

“Take that!”

One of the mercenaries slashed at Sara’s feet while sliding. But instead of using the blade to slice at her feet, he tried to slam the flat side of the blade against it.

“Ngh!” Sara jumped to avoid the attack.

“Gotcha!”

The other mercenary similarly swung the flat side of his blade at Sara while she was in the air. Short of being able to fly freely, jumping always left one defenseless. That was the reasoning behind their improvised strategy, and it was executed perfectly. The only thing Sara could do was block the attack with her dagger. Yet...

“...Huh?”

The man’s sword swung through empty space.

Sara had jumped in midair. She proceeded to do a backflip and evade the attack, retreating with nimble steps.

“Haaah!”

She cast slashing spirit arts through both her daggers at the mercenaries who just finished sliding.

“Damn!”

“Whoa!”

The mercenaries were the ones with no choice but to take the attack. They tried to regain their balance and fall back promptly, but they were too late to evade it. Instead, they parried the slash.

One of the attacks Sara unleashed was a slice of water. Slashing it caused the men to feel a dull impact as water sprayed everywhere. The other attack she made was an ice slash.

After landing on the corridor floor and regaining her balance, Sara retreated to glare at the two mercenaries with their swords held ready once more. They were back to square one.

“There’s frost as well. One water and one ice dagger, then.”

The man who cut down the ice slash had his blade frosted over. He reacted cautiously.

“More importantly, did you see how she jumped midair?”

The other mercenary was surprised at how Sara did a double jump.

For the record, Sara had jumped midair by creating a small wall of magic essence with spirit arts, using it as a foothold. She could run through the air if she used it continuously, but doing so required a lot of skill—it was easier to just use regular flying spirit arts.

Could these people be...

It was at this moment that Sara finally caught on to who these assailants could be. Lucci and the others she had previously fought with flashed through her head. “Be careful! These two are fast! They both have enchanted swords. The other intruders might be similarly equipped. Use magic to block the corridor with a barrage of spells!” she shouted at the two female knights.

“R-Right!”

No mercenaries had approached from the direction of the dining hall yet. The two knights who had been protecting their end while watching Sara’s fight nodded firmly.

Meanwhile...

“...”

At the end of the corridor leading to the entrance foyer, Ven and the other mercenaries were silently watching Sara from the shadows.

Fighting indoors as a group was extremely difficult. Weapons that were tricky to handle had the risk of getting caught on walls and furniture, movements had to be minimized as much as possible, and the layout of the building could be used to gain an advantage. All of these factors had to be considered when fighting strategically. As mercenaries that had fought many battles before, they understood this well.

“There’s no need to send everyone here down such a narrow corridor. But they’ll suspect us of something if we don’t send some reinforcements... Two of you go down the corridor and back them up. The remaining three of you will come with me. We might be able to get in from a window outside,” Ven decided immediately.

“Roger that.”

“Let’s get this party started!”

They quickly decided who would stay and who would go outside, then commenced their plan.

“There they are!”

“This way!”

The corridor team yelled loudly to draw Sara’s attention. Then they ran in to help their comrades.

“All right, we should head off too.”

Once he confirmed that, Ven led the remaining three mercenaries outside the mansion.



Around the same time, the battle outside the mansion was growing intense.

The trigger was the appearance of Alma’s contract spirit, Ifritah. The beast, which was large enough to fit two or three people on its back, had materialized out of nowhere, so those in the dark about its identity were astounded.

“Grr!”

“Whoa!” The mercenary beside Ifritah recoiled at its appearance. Ifritah used that chance to tackle him, sending him flying. It then proceeded to chase after the man at a speed too fast to follow with the naked eye.

“Grrrah!”

“Oof...” The mercenary that had fallen on his back had his stomach stomped on. Although his body was enhanced by an enchanted sword, it wasn’t a hit that could be withstood safely. The damage to his internal organs was severe enough to render him unconscious.

“What is that monster?!”

The remaining mercenaries stopped attacking Celia’s barrier to focus on Ifritah.

“Grr!”

Ifritah rushed at the next mercenary, but the enemies were more vigilant now that they had lost one of their group. The target of the attack reacted swiftly, distancing himself from Ifritah with quick movements.

“Tch, we’ve gotta deal with this monster first!”

Thus, the main focus of the mercenaries shifted to Ifritah.

“Wh-What is that beast...?”

“Where did it come from?”

“It seems to be attacking the enemy, but...”

Louise and the other knights inside the barrier were equally confused. Only the mercenaries were being attacked so far, but there was no guarantee they wouldn’t be next. It was only natural for them to be wary. The only person other than Alma who knew about Ifritah’s identity was Celia.

“Alma...”

The existence of spirits must not be revealed to anyone. If there was a need to inform someone about them, that person had to be extremely trustworthy. Even if someone was trustworthy, they were not to be informed about spirits without necessity.

These were the rules the elders placed on Sara and the spirit folk girls when they left their village. The spirit folk had long held distrust of humans because of the way they were discriminated against and persecuted by them. That was why the spirit folk departed from the Strahl region before the Divine War commenced, relocating to the depths of the Wilderness. They participated in the Divine War when necessary, but they left Strahl again as soon as it ended.

There were also records of the spirits in the Strahl region moving to the Wilderness with the spirit folk. They had also given up on humans. According to the legends left in the spirit folk village, humans had once used forbidden spells to enslave the spirits.

That was why in modern-day Strahl, spirits were even rarer than enchanted swords. There was literature that mentioned spirits existing in the world at some point, involving powerful secret arts, but it was all lost ancient sorcery

now.

No human alive had ever seen a spirit—not even royalty. There were some spirits who still lived in Strahl, but those spirits would never approach humans of their own accord. Even if they did show themselves, they were always mistaken for some kind of animal.

Alma had chosen to expose her spirit in front of humans. Humanoid spirits like Aishia would be assumed human when appearing before others, but Ifritah was a mythical lion beast. It was only natural for others to assume it was a monster—Celia was the only person who knew she had summoned it.

“Tch, what a pain... Did you summon that monster here?”

Lucci hadn’t realized it was a spirit, but he suspected it was serving Alma in some form. He questioned her out loud while crossing weapons with her.

“...”

“The silent treatment? C’mon, it appeared out of nowhere at a time like this and just started attacking us. There’s no way it isn’t your pet! We’ll dispose of it quickly!”

“Do you think I would let you? Hmph.”

Alma swung her mace with all her might, knocking Lucci back bodily. Lucci instantly leaped back, killing his momentum. But Alma was immediately in front of him again, aiming a follow-up strike.

“Tch!”

He clicked his tongue, and darkness flowed out of his black sword.

“Huh?!” Alma was wary of the mysterious darkness coming from the sword. She immediately poured magic essence into her mace, releasing a shock wave of pure light.

“Rah!”

Lucci lunged forward, slamming his sword at Alma’s mace. As a result, light and darkness clashed, offsetting each other.

“Ngh...”

The power of darkness overpowered light, swallowing the shock wave and pushing Alma back.

“I wanted to capture you alive if possible... But this is the way it must be.”

With a grating sound, her mace met his sword. Now that Ifritah had been summoned into the situation, Lucci had no choice but to change his plans.

“You were trying to capture me alive...?” Alma asked dubiously. His wording made her suspect she was part of their goals.

“Heh... Unfortunately for you, I still haven’t got the hang of this sword’s abilities. Don’t blame me if I hit the wrong spot, yeah?” Lucci grinned, pushing his sword back against her mace.

“What are you...” Alma frowned in suspicion, when she suddenly felt an ominous flow of magic essence near her stomach. She looked down reflexively.

But it was already too late. She should have jumped aside as soon as she felt the essence. There was no helping it, though—the attack was impossible to avoid without prior knowledge. Rio was the abnormal exception for being able to deal with such a nasty move at first sight.

“Huh...?” Instead of pain, Alma felt a source of heat. She looked down to see a jet-black sword stabbed through her from behind.

“Move it.” Lucci kicked her mercilessly.

“Aah!” Alma screamed in pain. The kick came from the front while the sword was stabbed into her from behind, so she had been forced backwards onto the sword.

“Oops, my mistake,” Lucci sneered, apologizing mockingly. A moment later, the sword in Alma’s stomach disappeared.

“Urgh...” Alma slumped face-first against the ground.



“Tch. The blood loss will be an annoyance, but at least I didn’t get the heart.” Lucci chose to leave Alma lying there, not bothering to stop her bleeding. Instead, he turned his attention to Celia.

“A-Alma!” Celia shrieked from within the magic barrier.

“Gwaaark!” With its contract master defeated, Ifritah roared furiously. It abandoned the other mercenaries to lunge at Lucci.

“Damn it, leave the monster to me! Bring that barrier down right now!” Now, Lucci had no choice but to face Ifritah.

“Guh...” Alma took that chance to secretly cast healing spirit arts to stop her bleeding.



Meanwhile, inside the mansion, shortly before Alma was stabbed by Lucci...

During times of war, the group holding the castle had to pay particular care to secure their field of view. Holding the castle meant they were protected by the building itself and could hide themselves, but at the same time, it meant their view of any incoming enemies was obstructed.

Defenselessly exposing oneself to incoming enemies by monitoring the outside was a problem, but hiding away out of fear of being discovered wasn’t good either. At worst, it was possible for the approaching enemy to invade without notice.

However, short of constructing forts intended for battle, it was difficult to design buildings with securing a field of view or preventing invasion in mind. Rio’s mansion was constructed with a focus on aesthetics, so it wasn’t suitable for holding during a siege.

Presently, right beside the drawing room where Satsuki and the others were hiding, Ven and his group of mercenaries were sneaking closer. They communicated to each other with hand signs while checking inside each window for their targets.

Then, they hit their jackpot: they could see Miharuru and Satsuki inside the room. Farther inside the room was a passage that led to a safe room.

It's here.

One of the mercenaries signaled with a hand sign. There were a total of four men outside the window, including Ven. They decided on their roles and silently began their invasion.

"Magicae Murum."

One of the men activated a spell to set a magic barrier in front of them and started charging towards the window.

"Haaah!" Latifa, who had been hiding in the corner of the ceiling above the window, fired a ball of magic essence at the unguarded mercenary's head.

"Wha?!" Taking an attack to the head was enough for even a physically enhanced body to fall unconscious. The first mercenary who entered collapsed to the floor. However, they had accounted for the possibility of an ambush. Seeing one of their men go down wasn't enough to shake the others outside, and they responded rapidly.

"Above the window!"

"Photon Projectilis!"

One of the mercenaries aimed above the window, hoping to eliminate Latifa from the other side of the wall.

"Aah!" Latifa backed away from the window immediately. She spun midair and landed on the floor.

"The enemy's here! Miharu, go back into the room!"

"R-Right!"

At Satsuki's order, Miharu promptly headed for the safe room.

Satsuki's side was naturally aware of the possibility of an outside attack. They could have all hidden in the safe room to remove the risk of being spotted from the window, but there was no way of hiding the passage to the safe room itself. Considering the likelihood of the enemy coming inside to check, they decided to set a trap. Miharu had been placed in the drawing room on purpose, to act as though they were defenseless.

“Next!”

“Magicae Murum!”

Another mercenary cast a magic barrier, attempting to enter again.

“I won’t let you!”

However, Satsuki was waiting with her Divine Arms. She fired a wind bullet of materialized magic essence from the end of her spear, hitting the barrier of the mercenary at the front.

“Whoa!” The mercenary who received the attack was sent flying several meters back out of the mansion.

“Get inside!” Ven and the remaining mercenary entered the room.

“Haaah!” The first to move was Latifa. With daggers in both hands, she leaped at one of the invading men.

“Tsk. Whoa, there...”

The mercenary immediately lifted his sword to take Latifa’s attack. She followed up with several swings of her daggers, but they were all parried away.

“...”

Latifa retreated with a light step, putting one meter of distance between herself and the man. Her expression was stiff, and her hands clutching the daggers were trembling.

“She’s fast, but...” The mercenary instantly perceived that she either had little experience when it came to killing another person, or felt some kind of aversion to it.

“Don’t let your guards down. She’s stronger than the knights outside,” Ven warned his men as he faced Satsuki.

“I know. But who’s the target?” The man facing Latifa no longer looked like he was underestimating her.

“Any of the ones at the back will do. These ones will just get in the way, so eliminate them.”

“Roger that.”

Having exchanged the necessary information, Ven and his men prepared for battle.

“Barging into someone’s home like this...” Satsuki muttered, her body trembling.

Ven furrowed his brow. “Huh?”

“...means you’re willing to be treated as intruders, right? This is justified self-defense!”

“Huh? What are you... Whoa!”

Satsuki suddenly accelerated, closing in on Ven. She then swung her spear with all her might. Ven reflexively went to block the spear with his sword.

“Haaah!” Satsuki swung her spear through, knocking Ven away bodily. In response to her anger, her Divine Arms boosted her physical body far more than an imitation enchanted sword.

“Ngh...” Ven was blown backwards with great force. He crashed into the window and toppled outside of the mansion.

“Are you serious...? Hey, Ven, you okay?!” the remaining mercenary in the room yelled.

“Y-Yeah!” Ven staggered to his feet and yelled back. He had received some damage, but he was fortunate enough to block most of the attack itself with his sword. As he was rolling backwards, he was able to adjust his landing to fall safely.

“Get out of here already!”

Satsuki charged at the remaining mercenary in the room.

“Tch.”

The man seemed to realize there was no good in remaining in the room. He retreated through the window.

“I won’t let you get away!” Satsuki chased him out the window.

“W-Wow, Satsuki...”

Latifa was taken aback by the sudden turn of events. But she soon snapped to

her senses and rushed over to the window to check on the situation.

Ifritah's out in the open! A-Alma!

She must have realized Ifritah was going wild from the sound of its roars. Latifa watched on as Ifritah lunged at Lucci, while Louise ran with Alma in her arms.



Meanwhile, far above in the skies where no griffin could reach, Reiss manipulated bullets of light to provide support to Arein and the others on the ground as he observed the battle. Although he could control their trajectories, he was quite a distance away from his targets. His accuracy was low, but it was enough to keep the kingdom's aerial knights back.

I knew there was a bird mid-class spirit here, but I hadn't expected any others... They must be demi-humans of the Wilderness after all, Reiss thought, guessing Alma's identity. He had previously seen a bird mid-class spirit patrolling the area when Rio was escorting Christina to Rodania.

Giving that sword to Lucci was the right decision. That sword is great against spirits. It should be able to take on a mid-class one easily. Though he seems to be struggling... And I don't see the other two outside either.

The "other two" that Reiss was thinking of were Sara and Orphia. If Alma was contracted to a mid-class spirit, it made sense that one of the other two was contracted to the bird spirit.

If two of them are contracted to mid-class spirits, then the third is likely to have one as well... I could deal with the bird one if it appeared in the sky, but another mid-class spirit on the ground would be troublesome.

With one of them materialized with no regard for the human witnesses, it wouldn't be strange for the other two to appear at any moment. Reiss hummed in thought as he focused on the movements taking place near the mansion.

The Heavenly Lions were all experienced fighters. They didn't have any secret abilities, but they were all equipped with imitation enchanted swords that could enhance their physical bodies, an effect stronger than magic. They had enough strength to take on a mid-class spirit as a group. Most importantly, they were

here to avenge Lucius, making their movements sharper than ever.

However, although the two most dangerous people—Rio and Aishia—weren't here, the people around Rio were formidable as well. A hidden weapon had just appeared outside the mansion in the form of a mid-class spirit, and Ven's group had gone through a window just moments ago, but was promptly chased back out. The situation everywhere was changing by the moment.

There's a spirit's presence outside the capital? This is...the second mid-class spirit? But why is it outside?

Reiss redirected his attention from Rio's mansion below to the edge of the royal capital. Then, he cast his gaze over to the mountainous region a few kilometers away from the capital, where he saw a huge bird several meters in size flying.

Things involving this boy never go according to plan... I'll have no choice but to use my trump card. That, and a number of the revenants remaining on the ground...

Reiss returned his gaze to Arein and the others below, ceasing his support fire to hold his hand at the ground instead. But nothing visible happened. After a few seconds of maintaining that pose, Reiss began to fly towards the outskirts of the capital.

Moments later, the remaining revenants on the ground all started charging for Rio's mansion at once.

Chapter 4: Back and Forth

Lucci was busy facing Ifritah. No, to be more precise, he was busy chasing after Ifritah, who was circling Celia's magic barrier.

"Stop running around, you pest!" he yelled, aiming a slash of darkness at Ifritah.

"Grrr!"

Although it was a few meters in size, Ifritah was a lion. It could move around speedily with ease and evade attacks by distancing itself in an instant.

However, it wasn't focusing entirely on fleeing. When Lucci tried to ignore Ifritah and attack Celia's barrier, Ifritah breathed fire from its mouth in an attempt to kill Lucci. "Grah!"

"Tch..." Lucci swung his sword, swallowing the fire with his blade's darkness.

"Grrr!" It seemed that Ifritah was especially wary of the darkness Lucci could release from his sword. That's why it focused on running around without facing him properly. When Lucci grew impatient with the game of chase and tried to ignore it, it would come back to interrupt him. It also attacked the mercenaries trying to break the barrier when it had a breath to spare. Because of that, the mercenaries were struggling to make any progress against it.

If I keep battling this thing, I'll run out of magic essence first. Is that its goal? What should I do? Even if I can warp my blade, I can't keep up with its movements right now. I need to get right up close to it the moment it stops moving...

If the battle drew out, Lucci would be the one disadvantaged. His only options were to avoid any combat with Ifritah or eliminate it completely, but he lacked the means to do that.

Thus, while Lucci and the mercenaries struggled to attack through Ifritah's defense...

“Alma...” With a strained expression, Celia thought about how to retrieve Alma from where she lay a short distance away.

“I will go assist her.” Louise, who had been standing at the front of the barrier to lead the knights, turned back to whisper in Celia’s ear.

“Louise?”

“Now’s the time to save her, while the enemy’s in disarray.”

“But...” Celia hesitated.

Although Ifritah was running around, there were roughly ten mercenaries surrounding them. Even if they enchanted their physical abilities with magic, the knights had little chance of keeping up with their movements. One wrong move and Louise could end up on the ground next.

Although it had been a surprise attack, Lucius’s enchanted sword had taken down one of their opponents. With that sword now chasing after Ifritah, the other mercenaries began to feel more confident in themselves. Alma lay collapsed a mere ten meters away from the barrier Celia had set up, but the situation made that distance feel much farther.

“I haven’t contributed anything to this fight. Allow me to do this much for the sake of Lady Alma, who has protected us until now. It is a knight’s duty to stand in the face of danger,” Louise insisted, determination burning in her eyes.

Celia looked uneasy, but eventually nodded. “I understand... Please take care of her.”

“I will. Knights, fire your magic at any enemy that tries to approach me after I leave the barrier. I will focus on movement and evasion alone.”

Louise gave her orders, chanted the spell to enhance her physical abilities, then activated the magic. She watched the mercenaries’ movements carefully.

“Now!” Leaping over the dirt wall Alma had built to provide them cover, Louise leaped out of the front opening of the barrier. She headed straight for where Alma lay. Lucci was the first to notice her.

“Hmm?” He ceased his attacks on Ifritah and focused his magic essence into his blade with the intention of finishing off Louise.

“Grrrah!” Ifritah must have sensed his intentions. In order to protect its contract master, it breathed fire towards Lucci.

“Tch...” Lucci swung his sword, summoning black energy to block the flames. In that time, Louise reached Alma and picked up her wounded body.

“Ugh... Sorry...” Alma apologized in agony. She had stemmed her bleeding with her spirit arts, but the serious wound prevented her from keeping the art activated consistently. She had suffered heavy blood loss and it was clear her mind was getting hazy.

“Kill them!” The other mercenaries joined Lucci in an attempt to attack Louise.

“*Photon Projectilis!*” The knights stationed within the barrier cast their magic to hinder them. They were all united in rescuing Alma.

This monster shows no sign of attacking the knights... In fact, it seems intent on protecting that brute of a girl. Which means...!

Lucci confirmed that Ifritah was clearly acting to protect Alma and started thinking of a way to use that to his advantage.

Immediately after, he chose to close in on Louise, who was running with Alma in her arms. His decision to ignore Ifritah’s interference here was proof of his exemplary senses as a mercenary.

He easily outpaced her running speed by more than double. The few meters between them were closed in an instant, and the black sword enshrouded in darkness was raised in attack.

With him this close, Ifritah was unable to breathe fire over him. It could end up burning Louise alongside Lucci.

“Gaaarh!” Ifritah lunged at Lucci.

“Just as I thought!”

Lucci smirked, having predicted that move. He immediately switched directions from Louise to Ifritah. At the same moment, Ifritah opened its mouth to bite at Lucci.

“Take THIS!” Lucci’s sword released a shock wave of darkness, engulfing

Ifritah's large body.

"Ifritah!" Seeing that made Celia scream—but Ifritah's efforts had accomplished one thing.

"Ngh...!"

"Uhh..."

Louise leaped over the dirt wall before the barrier, tumbling to the ground. Alma fell with her.

"Ifritah will be all right..." Alma muttered to Celia before falling unconscious.

"It's only natural to prioritize the monster's extermination over the wounded brute of a girl," Lucci cackled heartily as he basked in his victory over Ifritah. He then turned to Ven, who was staggering to his feet by the mansion. "Yo, Ven! You having trouble against a single girl? Need help?"

Ven had been hit by Satsuki's attack, which had sent him through the window moments before Lucci defeated Ifritah. A short moment later, his fellow mercenary and a spear-wielding Satsuki jumped out of the window after him.

"Shut up! Stick to your own damn post!" Ven yelled in irritation. One of his men was unconscious after Latifa's attack inside the mansion, but there were still three on their side capable of a fight. The three of them moved to surround Satsuki.

"Everyone..."

Satsuki spotted Celia's magic barrier, the soldiers surrounding it, and the unconscious Alma inside, and fell speechless.

"How... How could you do such a thing?! Who are you people?! Stop this already!" she yelled at the mercenaries, glaring at them with all her might.

"Ha ha." The mercenaries exchanged looks and smirked as though Satsuki's anger was terribly misplaced.

"A bastard called Haruto killed our commander. That's why we're here! We'll take you hostage to get our revenge on him. We can't let a bastard like that walk free," Ven replied.

“Haruto did what? Wait... Do you mean... What are you saying?! That was because your commander killed his parents! He also abducted Princess Christina and Princess Flora! Haruto protected the two of them. Your commander was wrong first!” It was unjustified resentment, and Satsuki tried to protest with logic.

“Who cares!” Ven clearly had no intention of listening to such arguments.

“But...”

“We’re only accepting the fight that was picked. If you don’t want to be hurt, don’t resist in the first place. That’s all.” It was the equivalent of saying that the victim should just endure their pain, that they wouldn’t allow an excuse of self-defense. That they could go and cry about it.

“What a horrible way of thinking...” Their senses of values were so different, Satsuki was at a loss for words. She barely managed to utter a comment in response.

“Horrible? He’s the same as us. The type to return things in kind. That was why he sought revenge on the commander,” Ven said.

Satsuki snapped back. “No. Haruto is not like you people.”

“He’s exactly the same as us.”

“No, he’s not! Haruto will throw aside his own happiness to protect the people important to him. He’ll never be the same as you.”

“He throws aside his own happiness? Spare me the jokes. He’s living blissfully in a mansion surrounded by women. His happiness is right there—and we can’t forgive that. Seeing you makes us want to mess up his happiness even more.” Ven slowly drew near Satsuki as he spoke.

“I won’t let you do such a thing!”

“Then in order to protect your own happiness, you’ll have to murder us all with your own hands. I don’t know if someone as naive as you can kill a human, but I doubt you’ll find happiness in doing so!”

“Wh...” Satsuki’s anger had reached its peak. She no longer had anything to say, and all expression had fallen from her face. Only her lips trembled as she

tightened her grip on her spear. She was completely ready for battle.

Just then, Latifa appeared beside her. “I’ll fight too, Satsuki!”

“We’ll assist as well.” More people came out of the drawing room window—Miharu, Charlotte, Christina, Flora, and Vanessa.

“Latifa, all of you... Why...?”

Why had they left the safe room? It was dangerous—they should return immediately. Those were the unspoken words in Satsuki’s confused expression.

“We’re here to prove our pride as women. I’m only half-serious, but we overheard you talking. As a princess of the Galarc Kingdom, I cannot allow such low-life rabble to wander freely. That is why we are here,” Charlotte explained cheerfully.

“Ha. Those are some harsh words from such a cute-faced brat. But are you sure you should be showing yourselves in front of enemies here to abduct hostages? Those are the princesses of the Beltrum Kingdom with you as well.” Ven looked at Christina and Flora and sneered even more coldly.

“Oh? Why do we need to fear cowards who can’t even face Sir Haruto without hostages?” Charlotte wasn’t about to lose to them in words.

“What did you say?” Ven frowned, having a sore spot pointed out.

“I don’t know how you found out, but you came to this kingdom after hearing of Sir Haruto’s absence, did you not? A feat that shows no fear of a major nation’s power. As expected of a top-class mercenary group—except it also means you *did* fear Sir Haruto’s presence. I suppose even cowards are capable of having some good judgment, don’t you think?”

Charlotte turned to Satsuki with an alluring giggle. Somehow, that helped her calm down a little.



“Umm, don’t ask me... But, I agree. You thought it’d be easier to take on everyone in the castle than Haruto. A rather arrogant view to have.” Satsuki smiled more like her usual self.

“Indeed. So, let’s show them. Abduct us if you can,” Charlotte said, provoking the assailants.

“Ha! Doesn’t that sound interesting, Ven?” Lucci walked up to them, ready to face Satsuki.

“I told you to go back to your post, damn it.”

“I’m outside the mansion, aren’t I? Plus, a bunch of easy targets just came outside to offer themselves. They seem to enjoy talking big, so I should naturally teach them their places, no? The tiny sorcerer can be dealt with by the people I left behind.”

Alma had collapsed and Ifritah was gone, so there was no one left to protect Celia’s barrier. The only ones left standing were Celia and seven knights that could only enchant their physical abilities with magic.

Three mercenaries with physical body enchantments could easily overwhelm them in no time. Like Lucci had said, there were enough people remaining for that. Meanwhile...

“What should we do? We put on a brave front, but the only ones who can move around and fight are Latifa, Vanessa, and myself. If they push past us, we can’t protect you all... We even brought Princess Christina and Princess Flora out here... Is that okay?” Satsuki whispered quietly to Charlotte.

“Flora and I are greatly indebted to Sir Amakawa, and these men were involved in our abduction as well. It is our duty as royalty to stand and fight in times of need. Let us offer what little power we have to the cause.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best for Sir Haruto!”

“Please don’t worry about us,” Christina said resolutely. Flora also seemed worked up—possibly because the matter involved Rio—as she was unusually enthusiastic.

“Don’t worry. It seems like Lady Miharu and Lady Latifa have a plan,”

Charlotte said, glancing at Miharuru beside her.

“Latifa...and Miharuru?”

Satsuki looked at Miharuru worriedly. They had been friends for a long time, and she knew Miharuru didn’t have the personality type for conflict. She couldn’t imagine her fighting.

“Yes, please leave it to me.” Miharuru looked a little nervous, but she nodded with strong determination.

“At my signal, Miharuru will take her place and the battle will begin,” Latifa explained. “Satsuki and I will be the vanguards, and the princesses will support us with magic. If the enemy comes near, create a barrier with magic. Understood?”

“Yup, got it,” Satsuki said. She was still a little concerned for Miharuru.

“Yes, leave it to us. I’m starting to get excited.” Although it had to be her first time experiencing such a thing, Charlotte looked like she was enjoying the situation.

“I have no objections either.”

“Yes!” Christina and Flora also replied.

“Then here goes...!” Latifa took a deep breath. “Now, Hel!” she yelled.

“Grrrah!” Sara’s contract spirit, a silver wolf, appeared, with Miharuru riding its back.

“Wha?!”

“There’s another one of those monsters?!”

For a brief moment, Lucci and Ven froze.

“Go, Hel!” Miharuru clung tightly to Hel’s back as it charged forward faster than the eye could follow. It weaved its way through the mercenaries until it arrived before the magic barrier Celia had cast.

“Miharuru!”

“Celia!”

“H-Help Lady Miharu inside!”

Miharu jumped off of Hel’s back and rushed over the dirt wall with the help of the knights. The group over here had originally been planning to take down parts of the barrier for the knights to rush out, but the start of Latifa’s strategy had put an end to that idea. With Hel fighting in place of the knights, the situation turned in their favor.

“Wh-What’s happening?” Celia asked, bewildered.

“I’m going to help Ifritah materialize once more.”

“Y-You can do that?!”

Miharu nodded assuringly. “Yes. As long as I supply the magic essence needed.”

Spirits weren’t able to be physically harmed in their spirit forms, but their material forms could be damaged. Their physical abilities would decline if they maintained a wounded material form, and their bodies would disperse entirely if they sustained too much damage, but it wouldn’t result in their death. They were simply forced back into their spirit form. If the necessary essence was resupplied, they could regain their material form without issue.

The problem, however, was regaining that essence. Whether it was magic or spirit arts, the more unnatural the phenomenon occurring was, the greater the amount of magic essence needed. And it was highly unnatural for a spiritual existence to take a material form. That’s why it took a considerable amount of essence for a spirit to materialize. And it would take even more for a wounded spirit to regain an unwounded body.

Because of this, uncontracted spirits would take time naturally storing essence themselves, but a contracted spirit could receive essence from their contract partner and recover in an instant. Furthermore, humanoid spirits like Aishia could freely absorb essence from their contract partner through their connected path.

But that wasn’t the case for mid-class spirits like Ifritah. Whenever it needed essence, the contract partner had to be the one to supply it. However, Alma was currently unconscious and unable to prepare any magic essence.

“I’m going to send you magic essence, Ifritah. You’re listening, right? Here goes...”

Miharu would form a temporary contract with Ifritah in order to send it the essence it needed. The spirit needed to be the one to accept a temporary contract, but Miharu was well trusted by Alma, so that wouldn’t be a problem.

In terms of pure combat power, Miharu was indeed the weakest amongst the residents of the stone house. However, when it came to magic essence, Miharu had more than everyone but Rio. No matter how many times Hel and Ifritah were wounded, she would be able to bring them back without issue.

The main concern was the distance required for a temporary contract partner to supply magic essence—they had to be right beside each other. However...

“Grr!”

Ifritah made a full recovery outside the magic barrier. Hel and Ifritah—with these two mid-class spirits on the battlefield, the battle at Galarc Castle was about to reach its climax.



On one side of the battle were Lucci, who was equipped with the jet-black sword formerly used by Lucius, and thirteen mercenaries including Ven, who were equipped with enchanted sword imitations that, while not as powerful as their genuine counterparts, could still provide physical enhancements superior to ability-boosting magic.

Facing them were Satsuki with her Divine Arms and Latifa with her physical body enhanced by spirit arts. Alma was still unconscious inside Celia’s magic barrier.



Vanessa could only use magic to enchant her physical abilities, so it would be difficult for her to hold back the mercenaries alone. Even if she worked together with Charlotte's seven knights inside Celia's barrier, they would only be able to fend off three or so of them.

Celia, Miharuru, Christina, Flora, and Charlotte were all rearguard sorcerers—or spirit art casters, in Miharuru's case. They had to stay away from the front line of the battle, but there weren't enough frontline fighters for them to maintain such a distance.

That was how Lucci and Ven saw the situation—that is, until Hel and Ifritah joined the fray.

“Whoa?!”

“It's damn fast!”

Hel and Ifritah freely ran around the front of the mansion. The mercenaries might have been able to evade the attacks if there were only one of them. The physical body enhancements of their enchanted swords allowed them to react to the movements in time.

But with two spirits moving at once, they were helpless. If one of them had their attack evaded, the other would just wait for the right timing to make a follow-up attack. The two beasts moved in perfect synchronization, hunting the men down skillfully.

The mercenary men were instantly thrown into disarray. Three of them had already been hit by a charging attack and were now incapable of combat.

Satsuki and Latifa knew they'd just get in the way if they moved too much, and any spells had a risk of hitting Hel and Ifritah, so they left the combat entirely up to them. Instead, they were able to focus on protecting the princesses. However, that didn't mean they were spared from facing Lucci or Ven.

“Be careful of that man with the black sword! That sword can release a wave of dark energy strong enough to swallow up Ifritah's flames! It also has other abilities—the blade of the sword was stabbed into Alma's back while she was facing him. It was as if it teleported!” Celia yelled from the other side of the

magic wall, warning Satsuki and Latifa of Lucci's sword.

The blade teleported...? Could it be...?

Unaware of the identities of the spirits, Christina had been greatly confused by Ifritah and Hel's appearance. But after hearing Celia's explanation, she felt a sense of déjà vu from Lucci's sword. It was the same sword that Rio had struggled against when he saved them from Lucius.

Christina gasped. "Th-That black sword is the sword that Lucius used! It was able to slash at us from a fairly long distance away! The blade disappears from the body and reappears wherever the darkness is. The sword's wielder can teleport in the same way, so watch out for any darkness around you!"

She quickly shared all the information she knew about it. Things would take a turn for the worse for them if Lucci used that ability here.

"Wh-What?!"

"That's terrifying!"

"Hmm."

It was quite the troublesome ability. The ones who reacted with the most caution were Latifa, Satsuki, Vanessa, and Louise's knights within the barrier. They looked all around themselves, searching for any darkness. The most likely targets for Lucius's sword weren't the two mid-class spirits moving about, but the groups stuck unable to move. But they didn't find any darkness.

"Tch..." Lucci shot a resentful glare at Celia, then Christina. His enchanted sword's ability had been accurately exposed by the two of them.

An ability like that would have caught one of us by now, but he's barely used it. Why...?

Celia considered the reasons. Perhaps Lucci lacked the magic essence to bring out the sword's ability, or perhaps...

"He hasn't teleported himself during this battle! And he only teleported the blade once, to stab Alma in the back... He might not be able to use the sword's ability very well yet! There have been plenty of opportunities to take, yet he didn't."

That was the more likely reason. And in reality—

Shit...

Lucci frowned at the pinpoint analysis. He was unable to use the enchanted sword as freely as Lucius had been when he was alive.

In fact, he was moving to evade Hel and Ifritah's attacks right now when he could have just teleported away to gain distance. If their goal was to take a hostage, he could have teleported inside Celia's magic barrier or behind Christina and Flora at any time.

"Seems like that's the truth."

"Yes, but it's best not to let our guards down..."

Satsuki and Latifa's expressions relaxed a little. But just then—

"Wraaah!"

Just as Celia's side gained reassuring reinforcements in the form of Hel and Ifritah, Lucci's side gained unexpected reinforcements of their own. It was the remaining revenants on the grounds. There were a few dozen of them left. Without a sideward glance, the revenants charged straight for Hel and Ifritah.

"Wh-What are those things?!"

Satsuki had been inside the safe room earlier, so she was seeing them for the first time. They had humanoid forms, but their shocking appearances were clearly inhuman.

"They're the monsters that fell on the castle! Their movements are quick and they can't be killed without hitting their heads or hearts, so be careful!" Celia called out, providing her with more information. Celia, Sara, and Alma's fine teamwork had rapidly eliminated the revenants around the mansion, but there had still been many remaining in the other areas of the castle.

On top of that, Arein's group was still in the air, bombing them with attacks and dragging out the battle within the castle walls.

Reiss's monsters, huh? Honestly, there's so much that we don't know about him and his monsters, but... Arein thought, definitely grateful for the help right now. Lucci and the others were similarly shocked by the unexpected

reinforcements, but they had guessed it was Reiss who had sent them and smirked.

“Ha, perfect timing! The monsters can take it out on each other!”

“Use this chance to capture the hostages!”

Lucci decided to use the opportunity to ignore Hel and Ifritah. Ven and his men responded accordingly right away.

“Grah!”

“Grr!”

Hel and Ifritah tried to mow down the approaching revenants with their breaths of ice and fire, but their hardened skin was resistant to the elements. It was also possible that they couldn't feel the pain. Whether their bodies were frozen or burnt, they advanced without a care.

Meanwhile, the majority of the remaining mercenaries—including Ven—headed towards Satsuki and the others by the mansion. There were ten of them in total.

“Guh...”

Satsuki swung her spear to create a storm wind to push them back. But Ven and his men dispersed to the sides, allowing six of their ten to escape the attack.

“Now's the time! The five of you, go!” Louise shouted from within Celia's barrier.

They had aimed for the exact moment Satsuki activated her Divine Arms. Celia opened a cavity at the rear of the barrier, allowing five of the knights inside to begin charging. She then closed the holes at both ends of the barrier, preventing anyone from entering at all.

“Haaah!”

The knights mercilessly struck their swords at the stomachs of the mercenaries that had been knocked off-balance by Satsuki's wind. A strike in the wrong spot could be fatal, but they spared them from a direct kill in hopes of interrogating any captured men later.

At any rate, four of the mercenaries were taken out in one go. The knights remained calm in the face of their difference in abilities, stubbornly waiting for a chance at victory.

On the other hand, there were still a large number of revenants remaining, clinging to Hel and Ifritah as they tried to shake them off.

“Force your way through! Advance at all costs!”

Ven and the remaining five mercenaries spared no thought for their fallen comrades, moving to surround Satsuki’s group. They were met by Satsuki, Latifa, and Vanessa.

They were outnumbered enough for the situation to be grim... Or so they thought.

“I won’t let you!” Sara leaped out of the window, slipping past Charlotte to kick away the mercenary that had been approaching her. The other two knights that had been inside the mansion arrived moments later.

“Sara!” Her appearance made Latifa rejoice.

“Sorry I’m late! We’ve taken care of the enemies inside.”

However, the situation was still uncertain. It was easy to have tunnel vision on a battlefield with so many people jumbled together, and ambushes could lie in wait where one least expected it. The ambush in this case was Lucci; he was missing from the mercenaries that attacked Satsuki’s group.

“Wait! Where did the man with the black sword go?!”

Satsuki was the one to finally notice his absence, pushing back Ven’s sword with her spear and questioning the people around her in a fluster.

“I’m over here!” Lucci called out himself.

There, standing inside of Celia’s magic barrier, were Celia, the unconscious Alma, Miharuru, Louise, and another knight—and Lucci. He had used his fellow mercenaries and the revenants as a decoy while he headed for the barrier. Celia had sealed all the exits of the dome to make it impossible to infiltrate, yet Lucci was beside them. This meant...

“Ngh, he really can teleport!”

Louise, who had been on guard inside the barrier, was first to slash at Lucci.

“With enough time to prepare and across a short enough distance, that is!”

Lucci replied, giving a compact swing of his sword.

“Kgh—Aah!”

Louise was blown back, sword and all. Her body struck the inside of the barrier, and she slumped down on the ground. Lucci’s enchanted sword had boosted his physical strength too much for her to handle.

“Captain!”

“Whoa, there.”

Only one knight remained. She swung her sword immediately after Lucci was done swinging, but he swiftly blocked the blade.

“Gotta take out the trash first, right?!”

Lucci believed the knight was the only obstacle left and moved to eliminate her first. However...

“I’m sorry!”

Miharu held her palms out at him and released a blast of wind. The way she apologized while doing so was an expression of her personality.

She managed to avoid hitting the knight, but that was because of her current limits in attacking rather than any intentional adjustment.

“Oof...”

The unexpected strike sent Lucci hitting the wall this time.

“*Photon Projectilis*. Nice one, Miharu!”

With her instantaneous judgment, Celia canceled the magic barrier and chanted a magic spell. She was trying to land a rapid-fire follow-up attack on his rolling body.

“That hurt, you little brat!”

“Gah!”

“Urk...”

Lucci was desperate too. Getting hit by someone he had been underestimating angered him greatly, and he yelled while he rolled to evade the bullets of light. At the same time, he swept Celia and the knight off their feet, making them topple off-balance.

“Go to sleep forever!”

“Gwah!”

Getting to his feet, Lucci used his left hand to backfist the knight’s face and knock her out.

“You’ve done it now, haven’t you?!”

“Oww...” He stomped on Celia’s back with all his might as she tried to get up.

“Celia!”

“Don’t move, woman! The rest of you freeze as well, or I’ll crush this brat’s body.”

He must have been especially wary of Miharu, who attacked without chanting her spells. He pointed his sword at her throat while warning Satsuki and the others by the mansion.

“Guh...” Satsuki and Sara pressed their lips together in frustration, grinding their teeth.

“Looks like this battle is over,” Ven sneered, distancing himself from Satsuki. The other mercenaries also backed away.

“Tch, what a mess.” Lucci checked the status of his unharmed comrades and clicked his tongue.

They had sent a total of twenty mercenaries to the mansion and its surroundings, but only seven were left standing, including Lucci and Ven. Sara had defeated the men inside the building, and most of the men outside were picked off by Hel and Ifritah.

“First, let’s have those knights move towards the mansion.”

“...”

At Lucci's order, the five knights that had left the barrier reluctantly dragged their feet over to Satsuki and the others.

"And who do the monsters belong to? Let's have them removed promptly."

Lucci made his next demand, glancing at Hel and Ifritah. He didn't know who they served, so he looked around at all their faces.

Hel and Ifritah were currently being clung to by revenants, sealing their movements. Both of them were struggling to shake them off, but the revenants hung on with their teeth and nails, making it extremely difficult to do so.

But conversely, that also meant Hel and Ifritah had suppressed the revenants from any other action. If the two of them disappeared now, dozens of revenants would be released at once.

"Wha— If we removed them now, those monsters would be freed!" Satsuki shouted.

"I don't care about that," Lucci snorted.

"No, wait. Just leave them like that," said Ven.

"What? Why?"

"That monster reappeared after being defeated. It'd be a pain if that happened again. If we leave them this way, we can at least see their positions."

"I see..." Lucci nodded in acceptance, convinced by Ven's reason.

"But don't try any funny tricks. Order them to be docile, let themselves be attacked, and let the monsters have their way."

"Wh..."

As Hel's contract partner, Sara trembled with rage. Spirits felt pain in their material form just like any other living being. As someone who worshiped spirits, their ability to regenerate their bodies in spirit form didn't mean she was fine with leaving them in pain.

However, Miharu and Celia would be in danger if she didn't comply. Alma and Louise were also unconscious beside them. She had no choice but to endure the situation.

“Fine. This black-haired woman and sorcerer brat should be more than enough. Let’s get going. Retreat!” Lucci called Ven and the others back to him.

“W-Wait a minute! We have your comrades held hostage as well!” Satsuki cried, looking at the mercenaries lying on the ground. She probably thought they’d be able to negotiate a hostage exchange.

“Ha. Do what you want with them. We all came here prepared.” Lucci was uninterested in the offer. They must have all agreed in advance, as Ven and the other men showed no objection either.

“Why...” Satsuki muttered in a daze. Weren’t they here for revenge on Rio, who killed their commander? If they could feel that much rage at having their comrade killed, they should feel the same rage for their comrades sacrificed here. It was illogical.

In fact, they weren’t acting out of logic. One of their own was hurt, so they would repay that pain and then some. If they got hurt in the process, they’d just make sure to add that pain on in the end. That was all it meant to them.

They wouldn’t allow themselves to be one-sidedly bested. They couldn’t allow it, which was why they had to harass the other side in return. They weren’t moving logically, but emotionally.

“You keep an eye on this one.” Lucci removed his foot from Celia and grabbed her by the clothes. He then threw her towards Ven and the others, who were approaching gradually.

“Aah!” Celia rolled on the ground helplessly. Then, Lucci’s gaze turned to Miharu.

“Too bad for you, eh? Your connection to that bastard is what led to your abduction. You and that sorcerer crawling there are about to experience a world of regret for that connection, but if you’re gonna resent someone, make sure to resent him, yeah?” he sneered crudely.

“Eek...” Miharu trembled, but she desperately clenched her fists to suppress her fear.

“W-Wait! I’m the hero! If you’re going to take someone, take me!”

“I-I’m his little sister!”

Satsuki and Latifa offered themselves to protect Miharu and Celia. They were followed by Sara and Flora, who were more emotionally driven than not.

“Ha! Who would keep this many liabilities by their side with the threat of retaliation looming over their head? That bastard sure is a fool. But that just proves how it’s his fault you’re being abducted. We’ll give you plenty of reasons to resent him, don’t worry,” Ven, annoyed by their attitudes, said mockingly, spitting his malice at the girls.

“Ngh...” Satsuki grimaced.

I see... Haruto knew this could happen. That’s why he tried to distance himself from Miharu at the banquet...

Her expression turned bitter. She felt terribly panicked at the thought of things going exactly as Rio feared, when—

“Y-You’re wrong!” Miharu shouted.

“Huh?”

“Haruto tried to distance himself from me. But I said I wanted to stay with him anyway! That’s why it’s not his fault!”

Miharu faced Lucci and his men without any fear. In a rare show of both volume and emotion, she tried to stand up for Rio.

“That’s right... That’s why we have to be the ones to fight. I don’t want to have Haruto protect me all the time—I’m not going to be a burden!”

From her position on the ground, Celia used both arms to struggle up weakly. She squeezed out her voice to convey her determination.

“Tch, what a damn drag... So what?! No matter how much you struggle, reality won’t change!”

“Hey! Enough already, Lucci.” Ven called for Lucci to hold back his raging tantrum.

“What?!”

“Leave the rest for after the abduction. Arein’s squad is struggling with their

burden. We gotta get going.”

Lucci looked up to see Arein’s squad holding back the castle’s aerial knights even now.

“Fine... But this one attacked me without chanting a spell earlier. It’d be a pain to have her awake while moving, so I’m going to put her to sleep first. It’ll also be a thank-you for earlier.”

Lucci had nodded reluctantly, but he was fast to change his mind. He removed his sword tip from Miharu’s neck and swung the flat side of the blade at her face.

“Eek...!” Miharu squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the impact. However, what she heard next wasn’t the sound of a sword hitting her face...

“My sincere apologies for the delay.”

...but the sound of clashing metal and the gentle voice of an older man. Miharu opened her eyes timidly.

“I, Gouki Saga, have arrived to exact justice.”

On the other end of Lucci’s sword was Gouki, blocking the blade with his own.



Interlude: Travel Log

Some time ago, around the same moment Alma was defeated by Lucci...

Orphia had teleported back with Gouki and his people on a mountain a few kilometers from the capital of Galtuuk.

“Let us hurry, Lady Orphia. Please lead the way,” Gouki immediately prompted. He had been informed of the situation before they arrived.

Orphia had witnessed ominous black shapes raining down from the sky the moment before she left the capital. There was a high possibility that the castle where Miharu and the others were was in danger, so she had brought them here with great haste.

“Yes, but Ariel is only able to carry eight people at once... No, if we consider the possibility of an aerial battle, it may be best to limit it to five.” While Orphia could fly on her own, there were too many of Gouki’s people to carry.

There was the representative of their party, Gouki; his wife Kayoko; their daughter Komomo; Sayo, who left her village to chase after Rio; and her brother Shin, who came along out of concern for his little sister. There were also twelve of Gouki’s attendants, who had been serving his family for many years.

“In that case, we can split into two groups. Three of my people will come with Kayoko and me,” Gouki said, promptly deciding which members would head to the castle. “Aoi, Shin, and Sayo... You remain here with Komomo and the others.”

“I will set up the stone house here for them.” Orphia quickly set up the stone house nearby for the people staying behind to wait inside. The only basis for the bad feeling she had was the black shapes she saw just before teleporting. If the castle was actually safe, her efforts would be for nothing, but that was fine with her. It was better to hurry just in case. However, on the way to the capital, they discovered that her worries were not unfounded.

“What is that...?” The first person to notice was Orphia, who was flying in the front. She was at a height of roughly five hundred meters above ground, but there were many shapes falling rapidly from even higher before her. They numbered around fifty, and they were approaching them at a rapid speed.

“Th-They may be lower class demi-dragons!” Orphia yelled, identifying the shapes immediately. They closely resembled the winged lizards often spotted throughout the Wilderness.

“So that’s a demi-dragon... Hmm.” Gouki looked at them curiously, having never seen one before.

“They’re most likely winged lizards. But why are they here in such large numbers...?”

Their territory should have been in the Wilderness. The odd individual wandered into the Strahl region from time to time, and there had been kingdoms that tried to catch them for breeding and taming like griffins, but there hadn’t been any success. That was what Rio had told her before, so it was strange for them to be by Galarc Castle in such large numbers.

However, there was something about them that was different to the winged lizards Orphia knew. Firstly, their skin color was as dark as a Black Wyvern. Secondly...

“What?!”

When the winged lizard opened its mouth, a breath of fire came rushing out to kill them.

“Haaah!” Orphia flew towards the winged lizard, creating a barrier of wind to protect Ariel and the passengers behind her. The breath was cleanly redirected away.

“Splendid!” Gouki laughed in praise. “These things have appeared to stop us from approaching the castle, it seems. They must be related to the black shapes you saw earlier, Lady Orphia.”

There was no basis for his guess, but his senses had been sharpened by many years of combat experience, and that was what his senses were telling him.

“Here they come!” Orphia suddenly warned.

The winged lizards made a rapid approach to bite at Gouki’s group.

“Looks like we’ll have to eliminate them!” As soon as Gouki shouted that, he leaped from Ariel’s back, falling under the force of gravity. “Ha ha! How convenient indeed. As expected of Lord Dominic.”

He kicked the air and started running across it. The secret to this feat was in the boots he wore. They were a magic artifact crafted by Dominic, capable of creating tiny magic barriers to serve as footholds for running and leaping through the air.

Sara and Alma could do the same with spirit arts, but it was a technique that required delicate control of essence. If Gouki was to learn the technique from scratch as a human, it would take quite a long time. That’s why, although they were a little tricky to use, these boots were designed to support his spirit arts.

I may not be able to fly freely like Sir Rio and Lady Orphia, but at least I can fight in the air now! Gouki rejoiced. This was to be his first battle in the air.

“Hmph!” Gouki charged into a winged lizard from the front, drawing his sword as he passed. The winged lizard’s tough body was cleanly sliced in half.

“Ha ha, I couldn’t be more grateful to Lord Dominic. What a splendid blade.”

The sword he carried was named Kamaitachi. It had been forged by Dominic for Gouki after Gouki had told him about all the weapons and armor in the Yagumo region. The sword had perfect compatibility with its wielder, who had named it—Gouki specialized in wind spirit arts, and this top-class weapon could clad itself in wind arts just like Rio’s.

The winged lizards scattered like mist in the air, leaving behind enchanted gems that dropped to the ground below.

Monster gems? They’re not winged lizards...?

Orphia was confused by the sight of the gems. She couldn’t retrieve the enchanted gems during battle, but an analysis would be necessary.

She used her spirit arts to create several balls of lightning, then fired them at the fake winged lizards at a rapid speed. The lightning orbs struck several of the

creatures.

“Gyaaah!” The fake winged lizards merely staggered from the impact and continued to fly.

It seems arts have little effect on them, just like real winged lizards.

Thanks to that, she now knew their strengths and weaknesses. It seemed they were basically winged lizards that could breathe fire.

“Arts that convert magic essence to energy will have little effect. If you’re going to attack with spirit arts, create something with physical substance or impact!” Orphia immediately explained to the others.

“I see. Understood. Everyone hear her?” Kayoko asked the three attendants that remained with her on Ariel’s back.

“Yes!”

“Then let us go. We didn’t come along to be baggage. Let’s prove our worth.”

With those words, Kayoko jumped from Ariel’s back. Her attendants followed. They were elites that had been trained in combat by Gouki and Kayoko from a young age. They ran through the air without any fear.

Incidentally, the weapon Kayoko held in her hand was a kodachi. Even if she was able to run through the air, her weapon reach seemed insufficient to take on the winged lizards. However...

“Grah?! ”

A stream of water extended ten meters from the end of her kodachi, wrapping around the body of a winged lizard like a whip. With its moves restricted midair, the winged lizard lost balance.

“Hmm...” Kayoko pulled the winged lizard in towards her, then burst into a run. She then drew one more kodachi from its sheath and stabbed it into the creature’s head. The winged lizard died, leaving behind an enchanted gem.

What a wonderful blade indeed. The skin of the creature appeared fairly tough, yet...

The kodachi had pierced the head of the demi-dragon smoothly, like there

was no resistance at all. Both of the kodachi in Kayoko's hands were top-class weapons forged by Dominic. They were optimized for water spirit arts, which she specialized in.

If they can be killed with a single strike to the head, then there's no need to restrain them. I should be able to conserve my magic essence. There's no telling how harsh the battle will be once we arrive at the castle.

As she was thinking such things, the next winged lizard drew near to bite her to death. But the moment it opened its mouth—

"If you open your jaw so wide, you'll obstruct your own vision. And it's bad manners," Kayoko muttered. She waited until the last moment before moving. The jaws closed around nothing but air.

"Grr...?!"

Heavy pressure from above caused the winged lizard's body to drop. Kayoko had leaped up, using the momentum of her fall to thrust her kodachi in its skull.

The winged lizard made to scream, but its vision was already black. Its body soon dispersed.

"Right. Let's clean this up quickly!"



The greatest fear of midair combat was the possibility of enemies coming from every direction, but both Gouki and Kayoko handled themselves perfectly in their first midair battle, cutting down every winged lizard that approached. Gouki's three attendants worked as a team to handle their share of the enemies without any issues either.

They're amazing... I can't fight like that, so I'll use my ice...

Orphia was impressed, but quickly activated her spirit arts to join the fray. She figured that simply releasing her essence as cold air wouldn't be enough to freeze them, so she chose to stab them with ice spears instead. If Celia was a master at making fixed forts, then Orphia was a master at making moving ones. She simultaneously cast her flying spirit arts with the ice spear creation, counterattacking all the winged lizards that approached her.

"Kreee!" Orphia's contract spirit, Ariel, manipulated the wind to push the winged lizards back, adjusting how many of them approached at once.

Thus, over thirty winged lizards were defeated in a matter of minutes. At that point, the remaining enemies seemed reluctant to approach just to be killed.

"Gyaaah!"

They stopped their attempts to bite in favor of circling them from a distance.

"Ugh, their movements have changed. Everyone, fall back!" Gouki ordered.

"Please get on Ariel's back. They're about to breathe their fire." At Orphia's suggestion, the humans that couldn't fly returned to Ariel's back.

"Graaah!"

As she expected, the winged lizards began to breathe fire. However, Orphia and Ariel both could control the wind. They didn't allow the flames to reach them.

"Winged lizards normally challenge enemies they have an advantage over..."

The winged lizards here were clearly abnormal. They were monsters that dropped enchanted gems. Orphia frowned, realizing once again that something was odd.

“Hmm. Their movements are strangely unified. I don’t see any specific leader of the group... Their only goal seems to be to stall us.”

“Although we’re able to run through the air now, enemies that can fly freely are still difficult to take on.”

“Indeed. There’s no telling what’s happening at Sir Rio’s mansion, so we shouldn’t remain here any longer.”

Gouki looked around at the winged lizards with suspicion, while Kayoko expressed her annoyance at the battle dragging out. Thus, Orphia came up with a suggestion.

“How about you all go with Ariel to check on the castle first? I can take on the rest of them alone.”

“Hmm. Are you sure?”

“Yes. The numbers have been reduced by a lot already. The capital is right before us, and there might be something going on there. Ariel knows where Rio’s mansion is located too.”

Orphia recalled the black shapes she had seen before teleporting. She wanted to check on things as soon as possible. They were currently one kilometer from the capital. Ariel could make that distance in no time at all.

“Indeed... All right. We will return immediately if everything is fine over there.”

Gouki’s group specialized in close combat, so they had been disadvantaged from the moment the winged lizards started to keep their distance. Orphia was best suited for long-distance combat with her spirit arts, so it was the most efficient decision to make at the moment.

The winged lizards were breathing fire even at this moment, but Orphia’s wind barrier was blocking the attacks perfectly. She should have no issue taking them on alone.

“Yes, and I will follow after you as soon as I’m done. I finished preparing my magic essence while we were talking—I’m going to release a large-scale art. Ariel will take off at my signal.”

“Understood,” Gouki nodded.

“Go, Ariel!”

“Kreee!”

At Orphia’s signal, Ariel started flying for the capital. Until now, Ariel had remained stationary through the use of wind spirit arts, but it accelerated rapidly the moment it flapped its wings.

“Graaah!”

The winged lizards redirected their fire, but Ariel had a wind barrier set up to veer the flames away. Then, once Ariel had made it a certain distance away, Orphia began her attack.

“I am your opponent!” A large tornado appeared around her.

“Grah?!”

The winged lizards were swallowed in the tornado, losing their balance to the point they could no longer fly. However, the tornado itself didn’t do any damage to them. Letting them fall to the ground was one way they could be damaged, but Orphia chose to send them higher up into the air instead. Then she took aim at the staggering winged lizards and fired her ice spears.

“Greeeh?!”

An ice lance pierced through the bodies of the winged lizards. Some survived the first spear, but were soon taken out by the follow-up attack.

“All right!”

By the time Orphia cleaned off the remaining winged lizards, Gouki’s group had just arrived in the skies above Rio’s mansion.



Meanwhile, Reiss was hiding far above the clouds after sending the winged lizards to stall Orphia’s group.

A swarm of fifty dark winged lizards was eliminated so easily. I figured demi-dragons would be the best matchup against a caster and her mid-class spirit, but alas...

He had made quite the miscalculation. He hadn't been expecting to defeat her completely, but had thought she would struggle more than this. It should have been enough to fulfill his goal of buying some time.

Winged lizards were the weakest variety of flying demi-dragons, but that didn't make them weak as monsters. Their skin was hard and resistant to magic essence, their teeth were sharp, and they could fly around the air freely. On top of that, the ones Reiss released could breathe fire. They were not weak by any means at all.

What he hadn't accounted for was how skilled Orphia was at spirit arts, even for a high elf.

The spirit art used to fly in the air was highly advanced. That was why most spirit folk were unable to cast large-scale arts while flying at the same time—but it seemed Orphia was an exception to this.

Furthermore, she's brought along some powerful reinforcements. Where are all these troublesome people appearing from, honestly...

Reiss chuckled to himself. Even he didn't know why he was laughing at a situation one would normally be angered at.

It seems I was completely preoccupied with the Black Knight and his contract spirit.

He had underestimated the people gathered around Rio without realizing it himself. He knew they had some decent skills, but he figured they were fine to leave alone.

However, when all these skilled people gathered together, they formed a formidable force equal to a major nation.

There's no mistaking the fact the Black Knight is the most troublesome, though. We must obtain insurance against him. But if we're unable to secure a hostage, then... At worst, we should consider reducing the forces around him. The attack this time is assumed to be the work of the Heavenly Lions, after all.

If they couldn't secure a hostage, then they'd stop worrying about capturing them alive.

If we do this, they'll be convinced that I'm still alive, but...

But it was worth doing anyway, he decided.

Chapter 5: Hero Killing

Riding on Ariel's back, Gouki's group arrived at the castle to the sight of knights fighting assailants everywhere. They were currently 150 meters above the castle. At the hundred-meter point, the aerial knights were fighting griffin-riding mercenaries, firing magic at each other.

"This is much worse than I expected... Ariel knows the way to Sir Rio's mansion, right? Ah, is it below us?" Gouki asked, spotting Rio's mansion—or rather, the people around it.

"I can see everyone. The situation is rather bad. Everyone, be prepared."

Miharu, Celia, and everyone else were down below. Lucci had just taken the two of them hostage, so it was easy to read the situation immediately. There was no need to hesitate.

"These crooks... Let's go, Kayoko."

"Understood," Kayoko replied.

Without missing a beat, Gouki jumped down from where Ariel was stopped 150 meters above the ground.

"You three wait for Ariel to descend. This is our first battle for Sir Rio. Let us not shame his name," Kayoko said to the remaining attendants, then jumped after Gouki. Thus, the strongest married couple of the Karasuki Kingdom joined the battle.

By creating elastic footholds in the air, the two of them descended to the ground running. Air resistance was no obstacle for them, and they arrived in a matter of seconds. Their attendants were still incapable of such a feat.

"..." Gouki reached the ground first, having jumped off Ariel before Kayoko. He created a foothold right before landing, absorbing the impact and silencing his footsteps. Right beside him, Lucci was about to swing his sword at Miharu's face.

“I’m going to put her to sleep first. It’ll also be a thank-you for earlier.”

Perhaps it was because of her glossy, long, black hair. The sight of Miharu overlapped with Rio’s mother Ayame in Gouki’s eyes.

I must protect her no matter what. Now that I have arrived, he will not harm a hair on her head.

Gouki prioritized defending against Lucci’s attack. He slipped between Miharu and Lucci, stopping the black sword with his own blade.

“My sincere apologies for the delay. I, Gouki Saga, have arrived to exact justice,” he declared solemnly.

“Wh-Who the hell are you?!” Lucci raged, trying to push Gouki’s sword back with his physical strength.

“Silence, you fiend!”

“What?!”

However, the one who did the pushing was Gouki. He hadn’t sent any of his strength into his sword. All he did was step forward, and that was enough for Lucci’s body to be pushed back.

He took another step forward, then vanished. Moments later, he reappeared right before Lucci.

“Lucci!” Ven yelled. He had started running towards Gouki the moment Lucci was pushed back to cover for him, and he made it just in time. If he had started running one moment later, Lucci would have been cut down.

“Hmph...!” Gouki smoothly evaded the sword Ven stabbed from his side, falling back to where Miharu was.

“I have secured Lady Celia.” Kayoko joined him, having retrieved Celia from where she lay beside the mercenaries.

“Good,” Gouki nodded.

“Wha... When did she—?!”

“Who is this old man? And this hag?!”

Lucci, Ven, and the five mercenaries still able to fight were dumbfounded as

they gathered together in one group.

Kayoko's eyes were ice cold. "Hag? Such disrespectful fools. I'm only just over forty."

"Kreeeh!"

Ariel had also descended to ten-odd meters above ground, allowing Gouki's three attendants to leap off its back. The three of them moved to surround Alma and Louise on the ground as soon as they landed.

"They seemed like rather mobile fiends, so I waited until our defenses had gathered first. Now I can punish them without holding back. Is that fine with you, Lady Miharuru? The situation was rather evident, even without the need for words."

Despite glaring at Lucci and his men with seething rage, Gouki's assessment of the situation was extremely calm.

"Y-Yes. Thank you very much..."

Miharuru must have been extremely tense, as she staggered just from nodding. However, she was certain they would be fine now, and she was able to get back on her feet right away.

"Understood. Now, I don't know who you people are, but you've raised your hands towards people who are important to my master. Don't think you'll be getting out of this." Gouki's eyes glinted as he glared at the men.

"Uhh..." Sensing danger, the mercenaries all started backing away. The instincts that they had developed through all their combat experience were warning them of Gouki's formidable strength.

"Gouki! These men are the subordinates of the man who killed Rio's mom and dad! Be careful of the man with the black sword! It can release a strong shock wave of darkness, and the sword has the ability to warp the blade and the user!" Latifa yelled, sharing information about Lucci and the others.

"Oh?" Gouki's attention was drawn to the identities of the men more than the sword's abilities. A fire ignited in his eyes.

To think I would be given such an opportunity here...

He shuddered with excitement. Before he knew it, his mouth was moving of its own accord. “Finally... Finally, I can prove my devotion to him,” he muttered.

“Huh?” Lucci replied. However, it seemed his words were only audible to Kayoko, who was beside him.

“I will go with you. You three will be able to protect Lady Miharu and Lady Celia, right?”

She entrusted Celia to one of her subordinates, then stood beside Gouki. With a flowing movement, she drew her kodachi and shot Lucci a cold glare.

“We have even more reason to put a stop to you now. There’s no need to confirm the situation any further,” she said. The two of them held their respective weapons ready.

“I am Gouki Saga.”

“And I, Kayoko Saga.”

“For the sake of our master!”

“We challenge you to a duel!”

The strongest married couple and pride of the Karasuki Kingdom yelled together, then closed the five-meter distance to their opponents in a single bound.

“They’re fast!” The seven mercenaries tried to retreat immediately, but Gouki and Kayoko split up and cornered the scattering men, preventing their escape.

“Shit!” The men they approached readied their swords, but they only lasted a few strikes before they were disarmed and made powerless.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” There were five mercenaries remaining. The two nearest mercenaries to the disarmed men charged at Gouki and Kayoko, swinging their swords. But Gouki and Kayoko vanished before their eyes, evading the swings. All they did was crouch down on the spot, but to the men, it was like they had disappeared.

“Guh!” The men went flying through the air. Gouki and Kayoko swung the bladeless sides of their kodachi to strike the men in the jaw. They were concussed midair and knocked unconscious. There were only three mercenaries

remaining, including Lucci and Ven.

“H-Hey now!”

“This old man and hag are bad news!”

The remaining three were extremely shaken and barely able to keep their distance from the couple. But even as they ran around, Gouki and Kayoko were closing in from the sides.

“F-Fall back!” Lucci desperately gathered magic essence in his sword, scattering his shock wave of darkness to hit his opponents.

“Too slow!”

However, Gouki and Kayoko both leaped up, evading the shock wave.

In normal circumstances of war, unnecessarily large jumps during battle opened one to attacks. Humans couldn't control their movements midair, so the time between landing and adjusting their stance was the biggest moment of vulnerability. The only options were to attack while falling or to prepare oneself to block the incoming attack.

“Dumbasses!” The experienced veterans knew this and reflexively went for that opening. Ven and the other mercenary charged at their falling opponents.

However, they should have been more wary of the two that had made such a sudden and grand entrance. Both Gouki and Kayoko crouched midair and leaped again.

“Wha?!” Before the mercenaries knew it, the couple was on the ground. They stood behind Ven and the other mercenary with their backs facing them.

“Wh...at...?” Ven and the other mercenary had dazed looks in their eyes as they collapsed. Gouki and Kayoko had landed two strikes to their jaws as they landed on the ground.

“Guys! Damn it, you've done it now!” Lucci howled, trembling from head to toe.

“Rest assured, we have no intention of leaving the enemies of our master alone. We just held ourselves back for now,” Gouki said.

“The young ladies don’t need to be exposed to the blood and death of such filth over a situation of this level,” said Kayoko.

“We also need to interrogate you on anything else you may be plotting. The punishments can wait until after that,” Gouki added.

“That’s not what I meant! Don’t think you can mess with me!”

“You’re the ones messing about. I assume you’re here for your unjustified resentment over the death of that man Lucius, but...”

I will be the one to deal with him—Gouki signaled that to Kayoko with his eyes as he replied to Lucci. He then slowly inched his way closer.

“W-Wow. Who are those people...?”

Latifa was familiar with Gouki’s group, but Satsuki, Charlotte, Christina, and Flora had no idea who they were. They had watched the one-sided fight take place in astonishment.

“Don’t worry! They’re on our side!” Latifa informed them happily.

“That just leaves those monsters, then...” Six of the mercenaries had been defeated in an instant, leaving only Lucci standing. But Sara was more focused on watching the revenants swarming near the mansion with a grim look.

Hel and Ifritah were still being held down by dozens of revenants. Their flesh was being torn off and bitten into, leaving them unable to move. They were probably on the verge of losing their material forms.

They were holding on so desperately because of the dozens of revenants that would be released if they turned into their spirit forms. However, now that the tables had turned on the battlefield, they were finally able to do something about it.

“Hel, Ifritah! Thank you, you can disappear now!” a voice cried from overhead. It was Orphia, bow held ready in her hand.

“Orphia!” Sara shouted with joy as Hel and Ifritah disappeared in relief.

With nobody to cling on to, the revenants started to scatter. They didn’t seem sure of their next target, but it was clear that they saw Sara and the others as their enemies. But before they could make their next move, Orphia shot a single

arrow of light. The thick arrow would have taken quite some time to charge up, but she had been able to stay undetected in the skies and do just that. The powerful light arrow split into two and rained down over the spot where Hel and Ifritah had just disappeared.

“Graaah?!” Two dense masses of pure energy crushed the revenants to death, leaving behind two craters that were ten meters in diameter. The monsters vanished, leaving a large number of enchanted gems behind.

“That should do it.” Orphia descended to where Alma lay unconscious. In the one or two minutes since Gouki’s group arrived, the situation had been completely turned on its head.



“Ha ha, how wonderful. As expected of Lady Orphia.” Gouki chuckled heartily at the sight of Orphia’s grand method of eliminating the monsters. He then turned back to Lucci, the last remaining enemy. “Now, shall we put an end to this?”

“Eat shit!” Lucci yelled, making a dash towards Gouki. Gouki also launched himself forward. The two were soon within reach of each other and swinging their weapons.

Swords crossed faster than the eye could see, during which Gouki started a conversation. “Hmph! I just don’t understand!” he shouted.

“Understand what?!” Lucci yelled back

“Why are you so mad? What reason do you have to be so emotional?”

“One of my comrades was killed!”

“While it sounds like you have perfectly reasonable values, your actions are completely contradictory! How can you value your own comrades while stealing the lives of others?”

“It’s survival of the fittest! Anyone who isn’t a comrade is of no concern to me! There’s no contradiction anywhere!”

“That isn’t much of an answer!”

It was at this point that Gouki’s katana sent Lucci flying with his sword. Lucci’s body had a more powerful physical enhancement thanks to Lucius’s enchanted sword, but Gouki’s body was enhanced with spirit arts. They were equally powerful enchantments, but their base strength was different.

“Shit!” Lucci backed away furiously. There was no leisure in his expression at all. He was unable to keep up with Gouki’s attacks, and shallow cuts began to accumulate over his body.

“Let me change the question, then. If you believe in both survival of the fittest and valuing your comrades, why do you direct your resentment to Sir Haruto, who’s stronger than all of you? Explain that contradiction. Sir Haruto is the one who defeated your leader. Survival of the fittest means you either surrender or hide yourselves once your leader is dead.”

Gouki temporarily put some distance between them and pointed the end of his sword at Lucci to ask his question. Why challenge Haruto if that was the case?

“What... Ngh!” Lucci was about to let his emotions snap, but found himself stumbling over his words instead. He was unable to come up with a logical reason.

“Hmph, no answer again. You’re a child with no sense of reason.”

“I’d rather die than answer such a pathetic question!” Lucci yelled. His pride wouldn’t allow such a thing.

“Then die! If there’s someone you refuse to surrender to while believing in survival of the fittest, your only options as a warrior are to die challenging them or to quietly kill yourself somewhere out of sight,” Gouki rebuked him sharply. That was what it meant to truly believe in the concept of “survival of the fittest.”

“Ngh...!”

“You can’t even do that, so you harass him behind his back. How laughable! You only claim survival of the fittest when it’s convenient to you. Those are the actions of nothing more than a vain coward!”

“Sh-Shut up! We came to take hostages so he wouldn’t run away! That’s how mercenaries work!” Lucci howled like a cornered dog.

“Hmm... The same mercenary that’s seeking revenge for his leader and comrades? I thought mercenaries were all about fighting for money. How pitiful.”

You don’t even know your own reason for being here right now, Gouki implied with a look that bordered on mercy instead of contempt.

“Grr...”

“But I can understand you a little more now. There’s no justice in your revenge—you have no reason at all. You just want to resent someone. If you value your comrades, you shouldn’t have laid your hands on other people’s comrades. I hope you can understand this one day...” Gouki trailed off,

readjusting his katana's position. Perhaps he had started this conversation in order to vent his feelings for the man who killed Ayame and Zen. Or perhaps he wouldn't feel content without getting the last word in against the fiends who tried to harm his master.

"And regret it deeply for the rest of your life!" Gouki started running, closing the distance between them once more.

"Gah! Ugh— Argh, shit!"

The difference in their physical abilities was minimal, yet Lucci couldn't keep up with Gouki's sword movements. The more Gouki swung his sword, the slower Lucci's reaction speed was.

Sh-Shit, I barely have any essence left as is.

It was all he could do to maintain his physical body enhancement. At this rate, he would lose.

On top of losing the logical argument, he was about to lose in sword mastery. With nothing but complete defeat on the horizon, Lucci began to panic.

"Hmph. Your agitation is showing in your sword. You're full of openings!" Gouki saw through that panic and used that delayed reaction to slide right up to Lucci. He then swung his katana up from left to right.

"Wha—?!" Lucci tried to respond by defending, but his black sword sailed through the air.

"Fuck..." The hand that held the sword was also knocked upwards, causing the upper half of Lucci's body to bend back.

"Justice!" Gouki flipped his blade at the end of the first swing and stepped forward, striking Lucci with the back of the sword before sliding past his side.

"Gah..." Lucci groaned, collapsing to the ground.

"It's over." With his back to the fallen man, Gouki moved with elegance, sheathing his katana with a clink.

"Gouki!" Latifa called Gouki's name happily, waving her hand.

"Good day, Lady Latifa." Gouki's expression, having been sharp throughout

the entire battle, immediately softened as he walked over to her.

“Thank you for saving us!”

“It is my duty to protect everyone. Lady Orphia told us of the ominous shapes she saw falling over the castle, so we rushed over here. It was lucky we did so.”

“Lady Latifa, may I ask who this is? He seemed to refer to Sir Haruto as his master during the battle, but...”

Charlotte had just finished ordering the knights to restrain the intruders and carry the wounded to the mansion. She questioned Latifa about the curious information her sharp ears had picked up on during the battle.

“My name is Gouki Saga. I served Sir Haruto’s late mother while she was alive.” Gouki introduced himself respectfully in the Karasuki manner. He seemed to have determined Charlotte’s high status from her clothes and demeanor.

“Oh my, is that so...” Charlotte recalled how Rio’s parents were immigrants as she observed Gouki’s appearance carefully. His slightly strong accent was probably because he was an immigrant as well. The one thing she was most curious about was how he appeared to be of important status too. His refined movements were clearly ingrained deeply into him, and above all, the sword mastery he showed in the earlier battle was indisputably top class.

How interesting. The mystery around Sir Haruto grows again.

Charlotte smiled in delight, having taken a newfound interest in Gouki’s group.

Incidentally, the reason why Gouki and his people were able to speak the Strahl common tongue was because the Strahl region and Yagumo region once had a select few nations that kept in touch with each other.

Rio also learned this for the first time after meeting Gouki in the Karasuki Kingdom, but there were some nations that used the Strahl common tongue as a second or third official language because of this history, and the Karasuki Kingdom was one such nation.

As it was only considered a second or third official language, it was mostly

royals and civil officials that bothered to learn it. Their pronunciation was also rather accented when compared to the standard in Strahl, but Gouki and his people had been studying the language since the moment they decided to follow Rio to Strahl. The heavy accent had greatly improved during their stay in the spirit folk village, but there were still some traces of it.

“Oh, pardon me. My name is Charlotte Galarc, Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Thank you for saving us from the earlier predicament. On behalf of the kingdom, I wish to express my warmest gratitudes.” Charlotte picked up her skirt by the hem and curtsied elegantly.

“Ah, so you’re Princess Charlotte. I’ve heard a lot about you from Sir Haruto.”

“Why, I’m so pleased to hear that. Oh, and allow me to introduce you. This is First Princess Christina and Second Princess Flora from the neighboring kingdom of Beltrum.”

“Hello, I’m Christina. Thank you very much for saving us earlier.”

“I’m her little sister Flora. It’s nice to meet you.”

He must be a soldier who used to serve Sir Amakawa’s mother. From what he showed of his strength, he would have been one of the strongest in the country...

Someone just like the King’s Sword of Beltrum, Alfred Emerle. Since Christina knew that Rio’s mother was royalty, she was able to guess his background more accurately than Charlotte. For someone of such strength to leave Yagumo and come this far, he was probably incredibly loyal to Rio.

Memories of her days at the royal academy flashed through her head, making her frown. Feelings of guilt surged within her. Rio had told her not to worry about it, but these feelings would probably never disappear completely.

“And this is the hero, Lady Satsuki.”

“I’m Sumeragi Satsuki... Ah, that would be Satsuki Sumeragi in this world. It’s very nice to meet you, Gouki.”

Satsuki seemed quite interested in Gouki’s appearance, as he closely resembled a Japanese person, but first gave a simple self-introduction.

“I’ve heard many stories about all of you. It’s very nice to finally be meeting you,” Gouki said, bowing deeply.

“Dear, I’d like to move Lady Alma and Lady Celia to somewhere they can rest.”

Kayoko came up to them with the wounded Alma in her arms. Miharu, Orphia, and Celia were with her.

Celia had been treated terribly by Lucci earlier, but she hadn’t sustained any major wounds or fallen unconscious. Miharu and Orphia had offered to lend her a shoulder to lean on, but she wanted to walk by herself. The only thing she did was cast healing magic on herself just in case.

“In that case, please take her inside the mansion...” Charlotte had just suggested, when—

“A signal flare?” Its light shot across the sky above the castle.

“It isn’t a signal flare from our kingdom,” a nearby knight observed. There were different signal patterns for each kingdom, but she didn’t recognize that one.

“It must belong to the attackers. Their griffin squad must be fleeing,” Charlotte guessed. She could see the mercenaries that had been fighting the aerial knights flying away from the castle.

“I guess they gave up on the mansion...?” Satsuki muttered.

“Everyone has their own post in the battlefield,” Charlotte explained. “Their goal may have been to raid this place, but with the squad in charge wiped out, there’s nothing left for them to do.”

“So they’d abandon their comrades?”

Perhaps she found them heartless, or perhaps she was worried they would return. Either way, it was a question only a novice at war would ask. Her question was answered by Gouki, who was an actual veteran.

“Of course, there’s a possibility they may return, but the role of the enemies in the sky was to secure a path of retreat and prevent reinforcements from arriving. Rushing over here would be the same as abandoning that role. Unless

they had a plan that would allow them to rescue their comrades without a path of retreat, they wouldn't come over here. It'd be the same as an honorable suicide."

Whether it was in enemy territory or on the front lines, rescuing a comrade was a high-risk action. The rescuing side could end up needing to be rescued themselves, and anyone who left their post could cause the front line to collapse, causing even more damage.

They had to look at the bigger picture. If someone insisted on saving their comrade in spite of that, then they had to make sure there was no issue in leaving their post and keep a path of retreat secured.

It was easy for the side being rescued to unhappily think, "Why didn't you come to save me?! You've gotta be kidding me! Some comrade you are!" but the comrades that had to weigh the risks of rescue were just as easily susceptible to stress and guilt over abandoning their allies. But it was something both sides mutually understood when participating in war. There were even psychological tactics to leave captured enemies alive but powerless on purpose because of this. That was what happened in war.

"I see..." Satsuki looked somber, but seemed to understand.

"If the mercenaries in the sky have begun to flee, then it means there's no way for them to retrieve their allies. We can leave the rest to the castle guards," Charlotte stated.

Just then, something roared.

"WROOOOOOH!"



Shortly before the signal flare went up in the sky, somewhere in the rooftop garden.

Splendid work. Thank goodness everyone seems to be safe...

King Francois had just witnessed the fight take place outside Rio's mansion with bated breath. In fact, he was still watching them now. The enemies' movements had made it clear that their target was Rio's mansion, but there

was another reason he had been so intently focused on the mansion during the entire ordeal.

It began with Celia, Sara, and Alma taking on dozens of monsters by themselves, followed by the fierce attack of the mercenaries that were faster than what the knights with magically enhanced physical abilities could keep up with, followed by the appearance of a huge beast that started to fight the mercenaries for them, followed by Alma getting stabbed, followed by the hero Satsuki coming out of the mansion...

Who was then followed by the princesses stepping out into the garden, followed by the return of the beast that disappeared, followed by the monsters across the castle gathering before the mansion, followed by Celia and Miharu nearly being taken hostage, followed by the arrival of an outrageously strong man and woman from the skies who began overpowering the mercenaries, followed by more people riding a giant bird...

The situation changed more than just once or twice. There was no way he could look away. Even the reports from his subordinates began to get on his nerves, so he left the command of other areas to them from partway through.

I can't believe they survived an attack of such a scale without any injuries...

There were many things he wanted to confirm as the leader of a nation, but for now, he rejoiced openly.

Those helpers who appeared from the sky are most likely related to Haruto. I can ask the details from him in person when he returns, but I would like to speak to them privately under the pretext of expressing gratitude. Perhaps Charlotte can handle the negotiations.

At that moment, a knight ran up to Francois in a fluster. "The enemy has begun their retreat, Your Majesty! What would you like to do? Shall we pursue them?"

"Go after them, but don't pursue them too far. Make sure the city is not damaged in the pursuit. Some of the enemies must have been captured already—they will suffice for interrogation. What we should prioritize now is assessing the damages and treating the wounded."

“Understood. In terms of casualties, there have been a significant number of wounded, but no deaths.”

“Oh? So our military is quite capable after all.” He was tempted to compare them to the people of Rio’s mansion... But regardless of that, he looked pleased.

“The squad in the sky was mostly moving to buy the others time, so things played out well there.”

In addition to that, the castle had many people who were capable of using healing magic. As long as no one was instantly killed in one hit, there were many people available to heal them.

“I see.”

“Also, regarding the matter of their swift movement speed—the secret seems to lie in the swords they had.”

The knight reporting was about to explain the abilities of the enchanted swords the mercenaries were equipped with, when—

“WROOOOOOH!”

It was at that moment that something roared.

Everyone on the rooftop garden flinched in surprise. It almost sounded like the voice was coming from the sky.

“What?!”

Most people looked up reflexively.

“What...is that...?”

What Francois saw was an embodiment of despair.



Hero Killer.

It all started over a thousand years ago.

During the era of the Divine War, there was a being that was crowned with the name of Hero Killer for slaughtering countless heroes of the war.

The name of the being that even enchanted-sword-wielding heroes feared was Draugul.

“WROOOOOOH!”

A voice thundered through the capital. It almost sounded like the wailing cry of a man.

The one making the noise wasn't a revenant left behind on the castle grounds. It wasn't a griffin in the sky either. Nor was it Ariel, Orphia's contract spirit that was still in the air. Hel and Ifritah were still in their spirit forms after being wounded earlier. In the first place, it wasn't a volume of sound that could be made by creatures of their sizes.

“WROOOOOOH!”

The owner of the voice was the Hero Killer, Draugul.

Meanwhile, in the courtyard before Rio's mansion...

“Hmm. This is a rather strange sight...” Gouki furrowed his brow, looking up at the sky.

“Wh-What is that...?” Satsuki asked, trembling. No one there knew that it was the apparition of the legend. However, if Aishia had been there, she would have been able to associate his presence with Reiss, even if she didn't know about the Hero Killer Draugul. She had actually fought him once before.

It all took place in Rodania. While Rio was traveling through the Proxia Empire and Paladia Kingdom for information about Lucius, in the middle of Christina and Flora's abduction taking place elsewhere, Reiss had appeared before Celia. Aishia, who had been guarding her in spirit form, materialized to pursue Reiss, who in turn summoned a large number of monsters and undead knights to fight her.

The Hero Killer was the most powerful of the undead knights Aishia had fought at the time. Unlike the other monsters, he didn't leave an enchanted gem upon defeat. Reiss had disguised himself as Draugul to fake his death when she defeated him. At the time, the Hero Killer had been deterred by her overwhelming power, but the Hero Killer wasn't weak by any means.

The era of the Divine War gave birth to many fierce warriors; there was no way someone with a nickname as exaggerated as Hero Killer could be weak. He had earned the title by continuously sending experienced warriors equipped with enchanted swords to their graves. The nickname of Hero Killer was given because it would take the effort of multiple heroes for him to have any chance of defeat.

Minotaurs were dwarfed by the size of his ten-meter-tall body. He wielded a several-meter-long one-handed sword and sturdy-looking shield, on top of being dressed in full body armor. Two wings grew from his back like a devil or fallen angel.

The undead knight glared down from his position a hundred meters in the sky, eyes glinting with ominous hatred. The people inside the capital perceived his presence.

“If the mercenaries in the sky have begun to flee, then it means there’s no way for them to retrieve their allies. We can leave the rest to the castle guards,” Charlotte said.

“Can we leave that to the castle guards too, Char...?” A tense wind blew. Satsuki looked up at the overwhelming presence of Draugul above her head as she nervously questioned Charlotte., but Satsuki hadn’t asked with the intention of mocking the situation. Her expression showed how much she wanted to leave it to the guards if possible.

“Probably not...” Charlotte would have loved nothing more than to agree, but she knew things wouldn’t end well that way. She would have to borrow the strength of the people here to defeat that monster.

“It’s clearly glaring this way. How interesting.” Gouki stared back at the Hero Killer in the sky with a smirk.

“N-No, no it’s not! It isn’t interesting at all!” Satsuki shouted in protest.

“Leave this to me. Since we don’t know how it will move, it would be best for everyone here to focus on defending with barriers.”

“It sounds like you’re planning on charging in alone, but I’m going to fight too, dear.” Kayoko lined up alongside Gouki, who was raring to fight.

Gouki looked at his wife and grinned. “Hmm... Fine. But don’t think your excitement is being hidden right now.”

“Of course not. This is the perfect situation to test our worth in Sir Haruto’s absence. It’s only natural to feel spirited, wouldn’t you agree?”

“It is indeed. We will express our devotion for Sir Haruto by protecting everyone here. It truly feels like I’m swinging my sword for him. Bring the monster on! I couldn’t have asked for a more worthy opponent!”

Gouki pointed his katana at the sky and yelled fiercely.

While the fearsome roar and sinister aura of the being had clutched everyone else’s hearts with despair, Gouki and Kayoko showed no hesitation at all. In fact, their unfazed attitudes spurred on the others around them.

“I will fight too!” Sara stated first.

“As will I.”

“And me, of course.”

Celia and Orphia added.

“No no, you should all focus on defending yourselves. Sir Haruto isn’t here right now,” Gouki said, hurriedly encouraging them to retract their offers.

“That’s exactly why!”

“Yup!”

Sara and Orphia were unyielding.

“Hrmm...”

“It’s precisely because Haruto is absent right now that we have to work together to overcome this dilemma. If I let someone else protect me here, I’ll become someone who always needs to be protected by Haruto... I want to prove that I don’t need to be protected. I don’t want Haruto to distance himself because of my own weakness!” Celia said. She conveyed the same feelings she had before Lucci and the mercenaries here, in front of the Hero Killer.

“Lady Aishia is the only one who can truly fight together with him, after all. Even if the two of them were here right now, Haruto would leave Lady Aishia

behind to protect us and fight alone. But that's so lonely for him, and somewhat frustrating for us."

"We know he's acting for our sakes, but we want him to rely on us a little more."

"Yes!"

Sara and Orphia confessed their true thoughts as though to encourage themselves. At any rate, they had presented their motives for fighting. There was no need for further discussion.

Just like how Gouki and Kayoko saw the situation as a chance to prove their loyalty to Rio, the girls wanted to put up a proper fight in Rio and Aishia's absence.

"The elderly shouldn't dismiss the hearts of young ladies so lightly, dear."

"Hmm... I'm reminded of all the times Lady Ayame made such ridiculous requests." The feelings of the three girls had affected him.

"Either way, Ariel's presence will be indispensable in an aerial battle against that thing. Let us borrow their strength gratefully," Kayoko advised.

"All right, I understand. Let us defeat him together."

Thus, they all found their resolution.

"Protection of the ground will be handled by Miharu, Ifritah, and Hel. The two spirits will put up essence barriers, so could you supply them with magic essence? Offense isn't the only means of fighting. It's an important role only you can fill."

If they were going to fight the Hero Killer Draugul, they couldn't just focus on attacking. Sara nominated Miharu as the key to their defense for her ample amounts of magic essence.

"Sure, leave it to me."

Miharu couldn't imagine herself fighting the enemy that had appeared in the sky. She'd just be helpless and get in the way of others. The somewhat lonely expression on her face was because of how keenly she felt her current limits. However, that didn't mean she had nodded weakly. She wanted to do what she

was capable of, so she spoke up with a firm voice.

“The mercenaries might use this chance to attack again. Latifa and Satsuki will be in charge of suppressing them! Please guard the others, you two!” Sara said, leaving an order for Latifa and Satsuki as well.

“Okay!”

“Got it...!”

The two of them braced themselves and nodded.

“...” Meanwhile, the Hero Killer was still looking down at the ground brazenly.

“Why doesn’t it come down to the ground...?” Flora wondered out loud. Indeed, it could descend if it wanted to.

“Like the monsters that appeared earlier, it’s clearly there to support the mercenaries. I don’t know how it’s possible, but someone in the Heavenly Lions is clearly controlling these monsters from the shadows. In which case, they might not want to hit their comrades on the ground,” Christina guessed, looking around at her surroundings. There hadn’t been enough time to gather all the unconscious mercenaries in one spot, so they were scattered about everywhere. If the Hero Killer descended right now, they would be affected by the battle, and she assumed he didn’t want that to happen.

At any rate, it was impossible to predict how the apparition would move. There was no telling how long this silence would continue for. They didn’t know how he would attack, and they didn’t know if there was another reason why he wasn’t attacking. They had an overwhelming lack of information.

But they had to make a choice.

“We wouldn’t want it to fight beside Sir Haruto’s mansion and destroy it either. I’d like to make the first move against it...” Gouki said, presenting his first choice.

“Right. Orphia, please lend us Ariel.”

“Go ahead! And Celia, use this to recover your magic essence.”

The whole party climbed onto the giant bird’s back, including Orphia herself. While doing so, she handed a spirit stone to Celia. Celia recognized what it was

right away. “Thank you!”

After keeping up a barrier for so long in the earlier battle, Celia was completely out of essence. Partway through the battle, she had started to draw essence from the spirit stone Rio had previously given her, but she appreciated the extra boost to her recovery.

“All right, here we go!”

With Gouki’s shout, Ariel rose into the sky. Then, as though it had been waiting for that moment—

“WRRROOOOOOH!”

Like a fallen angel hovering in the sky, the undead knight howled loud enough to shake the air over the capital.

“Orphia and I will use long-ranged attacks to watch how it reacts first,” Celia offered, exchanging looks with Orphia.

“Understood. Kayoko and I will handle the close-range combat, along with Lady Sara.”

It was their specialty style of fighting, after all. The division of roles was decided swiftly.

“For now, I’ll use intermediate-level magic to gain the advantage in attack numbers. Orphia will watch the opponent while preparing a big attack!”

“Okay!”

“Septet Magi: Magicae Displodo!”

Seven magic circles appeared above Ariel’s head. One beat later, seven beams of light fired out of them. Each cannon shot that was fired like a greeting had enough force to knock out a warrior physically enhanced with an enchanted sword.

He’s not moving out of the way?

The Hero Killer made no move to evade.

“...”

He calmly raised his shield at the incoming barrage.

“Wha— You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Celia was dumbfounded as the fifth, then sixth shot met its target. He staggered a little in the air, but he was continuously taking intermediate-level cannon fire from in front without issue.

Eventually, Celia’s seventh shot met its mark.

“I’m ready!” Orphia fired a single arrow of light from Ariel’s back. All the magic essence she would have used on flying was able to be refined for her attack, making her arrow much more powerful than Celia’s cannon fire.

“Wruuuh!” Instead of raising his shield to block the attack, the Hero Killer swung his shield to knock the arrow down. As a result, he didn’t sustain any damage.

“I see... He seems to be rather confident in his defense. But the attack just now had enough force to require him to knock it away with the shield instead,” Gouki said, analyzing his movements.

Orphia’s one attack had the same amount of force as advanced-level magic. If I want to damage him, I’ll have to use advanced-level offensive magic too.

Celia immediately began to consider the candidates for her next attack spell.

“In that case, that shield and armor will be quite the nuisance,” Kayoko said, sighing in annoyance.

“Yes. Anything fired from afar will be blocked by that shield. And I’m sure he can evade if he needs to as well.”

Sara also realized the high difficulty of defeating him from afar and frowned. During that time, Ariel rose until it was higher than the Hero Killer.

“At any rate, we’ve now obtained information about his defenses. He’s also shown how he responds to long-ranged attacks. Which leaves the matter of close-range combat! Now, it’s my turn to test his reactions!” Gouki leaped down from Ariel’s back and ran through the air towards the Hero Killer. His opponent sensed his approach and made eye contact with him.

“...”

“Ha ha! He’s even bigger up close!” The Hero Killer was easily ten times Gouki’s size, but Gouki just laughed heartily as he charged forward.

The first one to swing their weapon was the Hero Killer. The one-handed sword was several meters long, so its reach was on a different level to Gouki's. However, Gouki understood that clearly as he continued charging.

Good reaction speed, and precise aim! His speed is also impressive, but...

Gouki jumped midair and evaded the attack. The Hero Killer's sword swung under him, missing. The wind pressure pushed his body upwards.

"Let's see how sturdy those weak points of your defense are!"

Gouki weaved through the gap between helmet and armor, aiming for the Hero Killer's neck. However, his opponent wasn't about to allow that so easily. The Hero Killer swung his shield upwards in an attempt to knock Gouki back.

"Whoa! That shield really is a nuisance!"

Gouki used his comparatively smaller frame to his advantage and evaded the attack. He then made a temporary retreat to where Ariel was.

"His reaction speed and movement speed aren't impossible to keep up with, but that giant body and equipment are a huge problem. His defenses are too strong. If we were to bring him down with long-ranged attacks, I could run around and distract him from lifting his shield. That may be the best way of getting a powerful hit in," he said to the others.

"An alternative would be for Orphia and I to blow away that shield so that you can all get a hit in where the body is uncovered by armor," Celia suggested.

"Ha ha, that sounds equally exhilarating. The thought of cutting down such a huge and solid body makes my heart dance. However, he's yet to show a true weakness. We'll need to observe him while fighting a little more to find his weak points!" Gouki said, then ran off to challenge the Hero Killer again.

"I'll go too."

"I'm going as well!"

Kayoko and Sara jumped off Ariel and followed him. Thus, the battle between five fierce warriors and the Hero Killer commenced for real.

Chapter 6: Tachi of Wind

Shortly before the Hero Killer appeared in the sky, Arein's aerial stalling squad had just begun to retreat from the castle at the signal flare.

"Run for it! No one's saving you if you get caught!" Arein shouted, hurrying his comrades from the rear of the group.

Shit... We sacrificed so much, and yet...

They were being forced to retreat without capturing any hostages. With no results to show for the price they paid, this was an utter defeat.

The raid on the Galarc Castle had started with fifty people, but there were less than half of them able to retreat. They had lost over twenty-five of their capable comrades, along with all the fake enchanted swords they had been equipped with. It was a huge loss for the Heavenly Lions. Unable to do anything about it, Arein scowled.

If we could at least retrieve the guys in the mansion...

There was no guarantee they were still alive, but he had witnessed the knights capturing their comrades just before they began their retreat.

However, there was no doubt retrieval would be difficult. Their initial surprise attack had succeeded thanks to the use of monsters that sent the castle security into disarray. Reiss had also provided assistance from the air for a while. But the more time that passed since the attack began, the more of the Galarc Castle's army was dispatched for battle. Even if they charged back with their entire group, they'd just be surrounded and beat up one-sidedly.

In fact, the aerial knights of the Galarc Kingdom were pursuing them right this moment, from a distance of several dozens of meters away.

There's no choice but to abandon them... Arein repeated to convince himself.

But just then—

"WROOOOOOH!"

The air across the capital trembled.

“Whoa! Whoa, there!”

Arein flinched in shock, as did the griffin he was riding. It lost its balance in midair and wavered.

“Wh...What is that...?”

At that moment, both the fleeing mercenaries and pursuing aerial knights completely forgot about each other. They were all distracted by the undead knight that appeared above their heads.

“Is that Reiss’s work as well? He didn’t mention anything about such a huge monster in the strategy meeting before the attack...”

The undead knight in the sky, the Hero Killer, was an irregular being for Arein and the mercenary squad as well. But they already knew who was controlling the monsters in this attack.

“I don’t get it, but our pursuers are faltering. This is our chance to get away!” Arein recovered immediately and focused on their escape. Fortunately, the army dispatched by the castle stopped pursuing them there, fearing further damage to the castle.

Thus, they completed their escape from the capital a few minutes later. They descended at a spring in the forest on the outskirts of the capital—the same place they had agreed on gathering after the operation. The moment they alighted from their griffins, exhaustion swept over them. They sat down in silence and sighed tiredly.

“Hmm. Your numbers have decreased a lot.” Reiss descended beside them, looking around at their numbers and commenting out loud.

“Mister Reiss...”

“I am aware you were unable to accomplish the goal.”

“...” The first thing that came to Arein’s mind was an excuse, which he swallowed with a bitter expression. The others around them had similar faces as they looked on in silence.

“I have no intention of criticizing you. You, your squad, and the squads in

charge of the mansion all worked well. There were a total of fifty mercenaries equipped with enchanted swords. Of this number, twenty-five were sent to the mansion, which is quite a considerable force. Enough to launch an effective surprise attack on the royal castle of a major power. That's why I thought there was enough power on our side, but my judgment was incorrect. The strength of those at the mansion caught me by surprise. As did the reinforcements."

Reiss lifted his palms and shrugged as though to say he was at a loss for what to do.

"Because of that, I had no choice but to bring that thing out."

He looked in the direction of the royal capital. Gouki's group was fighting the Hero Killer in the sky.

"So that was your doing as well?"

"Yes," Reiss said, nodding.

"..." He was unable to voice any criticisms, but Arein's expression was clearly protesting why Reiss didn't bring out a powerful monster earlier if he had such a strong card up his sleeve from the beginning. Reiss must have read that question from his face, as he began to explain.

"It wasn't my intention to let that thing fight here. I have suffered a considerable loss by bringing it out as well."

Namely, giving Rio the ability to determine that Reiss was still alive.

Reiss had already informed Arein and his men that he had faked his death before Rio and Aishia, but he hadn't explained that it was done by making Aishia think he was the Hero Killer and having her defeat him. That's why he didn't specify what it was he had lost in this situation.

"So why did you...?" Arein asked.

"The raid this time has taught me something important—that the Black Knight has surrounded himself with capable people. If we cannot secure a hostage, then we should at least remove some of those annoyances. The other reason is because I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor?"

“The enchanted sword Lucci wielded was an important memento of your commander. I’m sure you would want to retrieve it as well, no? And so, we’re going to retrieve both Lucci and his sword right now.”

Reiss revealed the details of his favor.

“N-No way. I mean, I’d love to do so if I could, but going back now is just asking for the people in the castle to snipe us down! Even with that monster in the air, they’re going to be on the watch for a second attack!”

They would be heading straight for their deaths, Arein argued back.

“I’m not asking you to charge in headfirst. Take this...” Reiss took out a sparkling gemstone from his breast pocket.

“This is...”

“You should be familiar with its use, no? It’s a single-use teleport crystal. It will take you right beside the mansion. And this one is for your escape.”

“When did you...?”

“Lucci was being pushed into a rather disadvantageous position, so I snuck through the chaos and set up the teleport coordinates as a backup.”

“I see. Nothing gets past you,” Arein muttered in awe.

“I’ve ordered that thing to focus on fighting in the air, so all their main forces will be directed to the sky right now. The mansion should be shorthanded right about now,” Reiss said with a smirk.

“Can I save the others inside as well...?”

“As you know, the maximum number of people that can be moved by single-use teleport crystals is six. It will be impossible to retrieve everyone. As long as you keep that in mind, I don’t mind what you do. However, the highest priority is Lucci and Lucius’s sword. If you let your greed get the best of you, this teleport crystal will not only be wasted, it’ll fall into enemy hands and be abused for their benefit. Please understand that.”

Reiss placed emphasis on his warning, not wanting the plan to fail.

“I understand... I’ll do it. I have no reason not to. I’ll form an assault squad

immediately.”

Sure enough, Arein accepted the teleport crystal from him.



Meanwhile, in the skies above the capital, Gouki and the others were locked in a cutthroat battle with Draugul. Gouki, Kayoko, and Sara were using the sky as the front line, surrounding the Hero Killer. He specialized in close combat, and his power, speed, and abilities as a swordsman were exceptionally high across the board.

“He has a high degree of skill as a swordsman. His use of the shield to defend is also top class. Above all, he has a solid build. Breaking through from the front is near impossible. It may be better to focus on merely distracting him,” said Gouki, who was challenging Draugul from the front. The Hero Killer engaged them in large-scale melee combat, making good use of his sword and shield while staying faithful to the basic fighting forms. He didn’t seem to have any means of long-ranged attack, but by simply swinging his shield, he was able to create a violent storm.

“Raaargh!” His sword swings also disturbed the wind with its aftermath.

“Hah!” Gouki made several jumps in midair, evading the areas with wild winds. It was at that moment that Sara made a move, having snuck around to the Hero Killer’s side.

“Haaah!”

Her dagger was within reach of the Hero Killer’s helmet. The next moment, his head had frozen over, turned into a giant block of ice. However...

“Rah...!” However, the Hero Killer didn’t falter. He didn’t stop moving. He shot his arm up to swipe Sara away from his face. Sara leaped on the spur of the moment and distanced herself. But the Hero Killer’s frozen head didn’t seem to change his field of view. That was how much precision was packed into the swing that chased her.

“Ugh... Where are the eyes on that thing? Jeez!” This time, Sara leaped vertically to evade the strike. She rode the wind created by the huge sword passing under her and spun in the air, shouting.

“Take that!”

Orphia, who was now flying by herself, successively fired thick arrows of light. Each one had the force of an intermediate-level offensive spell, but they all had a homing effect that focused on the frozen head of Draugul. However, he was an iron wall that didn’t even flinch over a spell of intermediate level. The Hero Killer twisted his huge body and swung his shield, mowing down the light arrows over an extensive range. But the arrows weren’t the main point.

“*Magnus Magicae Displodo!*” Riding on Ariel’s back, Celia fired the extra-large magic essence cannon she had prepared at Draugul’s frozen head. It was a simple but powerful advanced-level spell that had the same force as all the arrows Orphia just fired added together.

However, her opponent was still able to see every attack. He bent his upper body to easily evade the shot.

“In that case...!” Kayoko used the kodachi she held in both hands to release a water whip, wrapping around the Hero Killer’s neck. She then yanked on them with all her might, pulling him off balance ever so slightly.

“Gouki!”

“On it! Hidden Skill, Second Blade, *Aura Mico!*”

Gouki had made his way behind the enemy in the blink of an eye, closing the thirty-meter distance to slash at the Hero Killer’s back.

The cuts of wind his secret art created were packed with power, and the slashes caused the Hero Killer’s body to fall forward. The armor on his back cracked faintly, which didn’t escape Gouki’s notice.

“I will provide support!”

The moment where Draugul lost his balance was their biggest chance. Orphia immediately began rapid-firing additional light arrows, this time hitting his head with all of them.

“Haaaaaaah!”

Sara had also sent magic essence to turn her dagger into a two-meter-long blade of ice, slamming it down on his head from above. The Hero Killer’s head

jerked downwards.

“This time it’ll work! *Magnus Magicae Displodo!*” Celia had gone around to the front to directly land the second shot of her extra-large essence cannon. Cracks spread across the entire armor as Draugul was knocked back from his forward-bending position.

“Yay!”

Everyone cheered, thinking they had landed an effective hit on him.

“Raaagh!” However, the Hero Killer used the momentum of the knockback to flap his wings and rise.

“What?!” Gouki shouted, shocked by how vigorously he moved. Everyone was dumbfounded by his impressive show of endurance.

“But I saw there were cracks in the helmet and armor! If we can hit him one more time with an attack like just now...!” Sara said hopefully.

“Great idea, but it seems he’s wary of us now!” Gouki warned with a grim look.

Now that he knew that they had attacks that could break through his defenses, the Hero Killer was flying around at a distance to them. His flying speed was fairly fast—too fast for them to keep up unless they were able to fly freely like Orphia or Ariel.

“It’s hard to land our attacks when he’s moving that fast. And he’s too dangerous to approach recklessly...”

Orphia’s arrows of light were being evaded with ease.

“H-His helmet and armor... It’s repairing itself!” Sara shouted in shock.

Orphia nodded nervously. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Like Sara said, the equipment on the Hero Killer was rapidly repairing itself in front of her eyes. It wasn’t instant, but it was happening fast enough for it to be fully repaired in less than a minute.

They probably had to damage the skeleton body in order to defeat him, but now they had to start from cracking the sturdy armor and helmet all over again.

On top of that, he was constantly keeping his distance from them, giving his armor time to repair.

“Something that big, solid, and fast can regenerate itself? That’s not fair...”

What could they do about it? Despair and panic filled Celia’s face. It was only natural for her to be at a loss—no one there was aware, but many heroes had fallen to this regenerative iron wall in the Divine War.

“He’s more troublesome than I imagined...” Kayoko muttered, glaring at the Hero Killer circling in the air with great force.

“RAAAAAAH!”

The Hero Killer changed trajectories and charged towards Celia. His helmet and armor had fully repaired itself, and he was armed with his shield that was far sturdier than the armor.

“Ngh!”

Gouki, Kayoko, Sara, Orphia, and Ariel, with Celia on its back, all scattered in different directions. The Hero Killer focused on Gouki, chasing after him without a second look at the others.

There was no human that could survive a tackle by such a large being, physically enhanced body or not.

“Whoa! This is quite the predicament!” Gouki waited until the last moment before successfully evading the charge. He watched his retreating back with a grim look.

“Everyone, let’s all group up with Ariel for now! The situation will only get worse like this! Save your essence and stamina!” Orphia shouted at Gouki, Kayoko, and Sara. “Ariel, get everyone!”

Ariel moved towards Kayoko, Sara, then Gouki, to retrieve them in that order. Finally, Orphia climbed onto its back.

“The enemy has a huge frame on top of all that speed. It may be difficult to attack him from every direction like before...” Gouki glared at the Hero Killer as it circled.

“I don’t suppose he’ll just fly away like that, will he...?” Celia murmured with a

despaired look.

“He’s clearly aiming for us, after all. Fortunately, he’s shown no sign of heading for the ground, but there’s no guarantee this will continue forever. We need to defeat him as soon as possible, but he’s quite the formidable enemy. This is bad.”

In contrast to his words, Gouki had a fierce grin on his face, watching the Hero Killer.

“You don’t look very troubled...” Sara muttered with a sigh.

“He’s just a war nut, so don’t worry about him. He’ll come up with a ridiculous plan sooner or later, so give him a minute.”

Kayoko reassured the others, completely used to his behavior. At the same time, she showed deep trust in the strategies Gouki came up with.

Hmm. His body is covered in sturdy armor, and he constantly has his shield up. In order to defeat him, we have to destroy those and smash his skeleton body, but we haven’t been able to scratch the shield so far. The helmet and armor seem breakable, but they repair over time. Which means we have to deal even more damage than before, outpace the repair speed of the helmet and armor, then break his body... But he flies so fast, it’ll be a real challenge.

In reality, the strategy for defeating the Hero Killer was extremely simple. What Aishia had previously done was close in on the Hero Killer at a faster speed than he could fly around, then use one heavy attack to break everything before it could repair.

But that simplicity was what was most difficult.

If I use my secret arts in succession, I should be able to do enough damage to break the armor and body. In order to do that, his movements have to be stopped. Hmm...

The problem was how to stop the nimble movements of such a monster so that the secret arts could hit their target. Gouki considered the possibilities.

The best time to attack would be when he attacks us... But he’s especially confident in his use of the shield to defend his front. He’d ignore any superficial

attacks to charge straight for us. Wait, no. I see. He charges forward when...

It was at that point that Gouki had a light bulb moment.

“I have an idea,” he proposed with a grin.



Miharu and the others on the ground watched the fight taking place from in front of the mansion. They were protected by Hel and Ifritah, who had set up a two-layered barrier around them.

The Hero Killer had shown no sign of wanting to descend to the ground, so the group appeared to be safe within the barrier. The commander of Charlotte’s knights, Louise, looked around at her surroundings and reached the same conclusion.

“Princess Charlotte, I believe now would be a good time to restrain the mercenaries lying around,” Louise suggested.

The Hero Killer had appeared shortly after the mercenaries were defeated, so there were still a number of them lying around without any restraints. They hadn’t even finished retrieving the enchanted swords that were in the mercenaries’ possession. While some of the mercenaries had received fatal wounds, there were others who were merely passed out. If they regained consciousness and started attacking again, things could get dicey.

“Indeed. Can you handle that yourself?” But just as Charlotte nodded in agreement, a dozen or so of the castle’s knights approached the mansion.

“Princess Charlotte!”

“They’re finally here,” Charlotte muttered weakly, watching the approaching knights.

“This is...”

The knights that came running to them took one look around at the surroundings and fell speechless. The aftermath of a fierce battle spread around them—unconscious mercenaries lying on the desolate ground, enchanted gems left behind from the revenants, and a crater caused by Orphia’s attack.

At the center of the disastrous spectacle was Charlotte’s group, protected by

a barrier of light. Two huge beasts in the shape of Hel and Ifritah stood beside them, so it was only natural they'd fall speechless at such a sight.

"Perfect timing. Cooperate with them. Lady Satsuki and Lady Latifa will protect us, as will these two here." Charlotte looked up at Hel and Ifritah to confirm that it wouldn't be a problem, then gave Louise her orders. Louise immediately replied with an affirmative.

"Hel, Ifritah. Can you make a hole in the barrier for the knights to leave?" Miharuru asked the two mid-class spirits.

"Gruuuh!" Her words seemed to have reached them, as a hole large enough to fit two or three people opened at the front of the barrier.

"I'll be going, then..."

Louise gave Hel and Ifritah a curious glance before heading out of the barrier. She then went around with the knights to restrain the mercenaries and prepare for them to be sent to the castle dungeons. No one noticed the group of people watching them from the shadows nearby.



Meanwhile, in the skies overhead...

"I have an idea," Gouki began.

"Wow, Kayoko was right."

"Indeed."

Sara and Orphia commented in admiration.

"So what's the plan, Gouki?" Celia asked hopefully. She seemed to find Gouki's unshakable personality very reliable in a situation such as this, as she had the mindset to let out a small giggle.

"About that. Do you have an attack spell that would be effective against him, Lady Celia?" Gouki asked. "If you have a powerful spell up your sleeve, I'd like you to drive it into him and weaken him..."

There was one spell that came to Celia's mind. "I do. It's stronger than the cannon fire magic I cast earlier, and it's the strongest spell in my arsenal. But I

only have enough essence to cast it once. Whether I can hit him when he moves around like that is...”

She wasn’t confident.

“You only need to hit him once. As long as we can make sure that one spell hits, it won’t be a problem.”

“R-Right. But how can we make sure...?”

The opponent they were up against was no pushover, but Celia nodded first and waited for the rest of Gouki’s idea.

“If it’s just for a brief moment, then I have a means of moving fast enough to match his speed. I’ll first aim an attack directly at his front, reducing his speed. That should make it easier to hit him with magic. If you use that chance to hit him, you can buy us some time.”

“I understand...”

“Lady Sara, Lady Orphia, and Kayoko’s cooperation will also be essential. Lady Sara and Lady Orphia, are you able to create water whips like Kayoko’s in order to restrain him?”

“It might be difficult if he’s moving around. I’m not too sure about it. If the three of us release whips at the same time, we might be able to restrain him, but I don’t think it’d take much for him to break free with his strength...”

Sara and Orphia exchanged expressions of uncertainty.

“You’ll be restraining him after Lady Celia casts her magic, so his movements should be slowed somewhat. If the three of you could use that opening to restrain him enough to prevent him from flying away, that would be great.”

“Right, that should be manageable,” Sara said, nodding with more confidence.

“Then the next step is to pass him and make him face a different direction. Lady Orphia, can you ask Ariel to adjust its flight path?”

“I can. Ariel,” Orphia called. Ariel began to circle around.

“Now then, I will be the vanguard, so I’m counting on you all to activate your techniques at the right time.”

“Roger that!”

They had no intention of losing. They wouldn’t have come up to the sky in the first place if they had. That’s why the group all nodded firmly at Gouki’s instructions.

Thus, the five heroes resumed their battle with the Hero Killer.

“I’m going to prepare the spell. Wait one moment.”

First, Celia began her preparations to cast the spell for the plan. The Claire family had a secret attack spell that was passed down through the generations. This secret spell was the magic Celia was about to use.

In terms of modern magic, the spell would be categorized in the highest grade. It was a super spell that could only be cast by those of Claire blood with exceptional magical talent.

“Aperio: Caelestis Magicus,” Celia murmured, creating a magic circle that wrapped around her. *“Verifico: Celia Claire.”*

The magic circle wrapping around her glowed brighter.

“Salvatio Initium.”

The magic circle condensed around her right arm.

“Impetus...”

She then cast an extra spell to provide the necessary magic essence for activation. In response, all the magic essence within her began to gather in her right arm. Magic essence was normally unable to be seen by anyone who couldn’t cast spirit arts, but the essence had condensed so much, destructive energy was visibly flowing from her arm before being activated.

Gouki’s eyes widened at the sight of Celia’s right arm. “That looks like quite the tremendous spell you’re preparing,” he commented

Celia nodded with a strained expression. “I believe I’ll be able to meet your expectations—as long as it hits, that is.”

“That’s amazing...” Orphia muttered, staring at Celia’s arm.

“Yes... I wouldn’t want to handle essence this close to exploding. In fact, I

can't," Sara agreed, forehead breaking into a cold sweat.

"It's taking all I have to control the essence. Every other task is entrusted to the spell formula..."

All Celia was doing right now was controlling the magic essence. The majority of the other tasks required to activate the magic were left to the spell formula so that all her processing ability could focus on essence control. A spirit arts user would have had to perform all those tasks by themselves, so entrusting such things to the spell formula was something that could only be done with magic.

Thus, after a few long seconds...

"*Mora...* I'm done preparing. All that's left is to chant the spell and the magic will activate. Whenever you're ready," Celia said, having finally completed her preparation to activate the magic.

"Thank you. Seeing your spell has helped me refocus my mind," Gouki said to Celia, then glanced at Orphia. "Now, if you would do the honors, Lady Orphia."

"We just need to charge straight at him, right?"

"Indeed! Please do!"

"Got it. Ariel!"

"Kreeeh!" At Orphia's signal, Ariel changed direction. Until now, it had been flying in circles around the Hero Killer to maintain a distance, but it now backed away in order to make a direct approach.

Ten-odd seconds later, Ariel was glaring at the Hero Killer from a distance of a hundred meters.

"Wruuuh!" The Hero Killer seemed to have sensed Ariel's incoming charge. With full confidence in his own defenses, he lifted his shield and accelerated towards them as though to accept their challenge. At this point, there were only a few dozen meters left between them.

"Kreeeh!" Meanwhile, Ariel was normally surrounded by a wind barrier to keep its passengers from feeling any wind resistance during flight. Under such conditions, Gouki was able to stand and draw his katana.

“Now, here I go!” Gouki said with a light leap. A strong wind blew softly at his back—and the next moment, Gouki was accelerating through the sky, leaving Ariel behind him.

“So fast!” Sara was shocked.

“Is that Haruto’s technique for moving at high speeds?” Orphia asked, guessing at the theory behind his high-speed movement with wide eyes. High-speed movement with wind spirit arts was Rio’s specialty.

My acceleration isn’t as skillful as Sir Rio’s, but yes. All I can do is charge forward in a straight line, thanks to Lord Dominic forging Kamaitachi for me!

That’s right—by equipping his beloved blade Kamaitachi, Gouki was able to obtain the technique for accelerating in one go.

His technique was still rough compared to Rio’s, but he was still able to imitate him. Perhaps it was because he had fallen in love at first sight with the technique after Rio used it against him, and had continuously imagined himself using it ever since. Or perhaps it was the result of all his loyalty towards Rio.

“Hidden Skill, First Blade, *Aura Vulnus!*”

Gouki was already within a dozen meters of the Hero Killer, sending a slashing attack of wind diagonally upwards to the right. His might was far beyond what he had demonstrated to Rio in the Karasuki Kingdom.

“AAAAARH!”

The huge frame of the Hero Killer that was protected by his shield decelerated dramatically. It still wasn’t enough to damage him.

“Hidden Skill, Second Blade, *Aura Mico!*”

At that moment, Gouki turned his katana and stepped even closer to the undead knight. He charged into his decelerated opponent and aimed another attack at the shield, this time making direct contact with the surface. The Hero Killer decelerated further.

“This mass sure is a struggle to overpower! I cannot even crack the shield... But he’s slowed down a good amount. Now, Lady Celia!” Gouki yelled at Celia behind him. Ariel flew forwards, approaching the Hero Killer. As it passed by,

Celia swung her right arm with the magic circle around it like a sword.

“Durandal!”

This was the secret spell of the Count Claire family. The condensed magic essence was released as pure destructive energy, attempting to mow down the enemy before them.

“RAAAAAH!” The Hero Killer must have sensed the threat of Celia’s magic, as he desperately tried to brace his shield for the attack.



“TAKE THAT!” Celia roared.

“WRAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The shield that hadn’t even chipped until now shattered into pieces. In fact, half of the body that had been holding the shield was gone, armor and all.

The highest grade of attack magic normally focused on expanding the area of its attack range as much as possible, but Celia’s Durandal magic focused on condensing the power into as small of a range as possible. As a result, the iron wall of the Hero Killer, which had withstood numerous attacks from heroes during the Divine War, was blown away.

“A-Amazing! That’s incredible, Celia!”

“Yeah!”

Sara and Orphia cheered in spite of themselves.

“Th-That’s all...I’ve got...” Celia weakly collapsed against Ariel’s back.

“As expected of Sir Rio’s teacher. Splendid work, Lady Celia. I doubt there’s even a need for us anymore, but a job is a job.” Kayoko released the water whip from her kodachi.

“Wait, it’s our turn, Sara!”

“R-Right!”

Sara and Orphia created water whips in their hands and used them to grasp the Hero Killer’s body.

“RAAAAAAH!” With half his body gone and the rest of his body restrained, the Hero Killer toppled off balance midair, exactly as they planned.

“Ha ha, well done indeed! You’ve made my job much easier now. However, that would be discourteous to this warrior, no matter how much of a monster he may be. I shall assist in putting him out of his misery with my hidden skill!” Gouki made a huge leap midair, rushing at the Hero Killer once more with his katana held over his head. By imitating Rio’s movement techniques, he accelerated as he approached.

“Hidden Skill, First Blade, *Aura Vulnus!*”

A diagonal slashing attack flew towards the undead knight. In his unbalanced state, the Hero Killer was unable to swing his sword fast enough and took the hit directly to his chestplate.

“Hidden Skill, Second Blade, *Aura Mico!*”

Then, Gouki accelerated even further, swinging his katana to release a diagonal slashing attack in the opposite direction. When the two attacks overlapped with each other, the undead knight’s armor completely shattered, causing him to roar in pain.

“GRAAAH!”

But he had still yet to die.

“Then take this! Hidden Skill, Third Blade, *Aura Vacuo!*” With his katana swung the whole way through, Gouki made a following horizontal slash, dividing the Hero Killer’s ribcage into two.

“...” Not even the Hero Killer could survive that. Both his body and the sword in his hand disintegrated into the air.

“Looks like the Fourth Blade wasn’t needed.” Gouki sheathed his katana cleanly, then returned to Ariel’s back.

Not long after, cheers shook the Galarc Kingdom’s capital. It was the voices of the citizens who had watched the battle take place in the sky. A hymn of victory.

Chapter 7: Signs of More Trouble

Cheers echoed across the capital. However, far in the skies above...

I went as far as using the Hero Killer Draugul, yet their numbers haven't been reduced at all. An unsatisfactory result indeed...

Reiss watched on as Gouki and the others descended to the ground on Ariel's back.

Celia Claire... I knew she wasn't an average sorcerer, but to think she could use celestial magic... So the descendants of the divine sorcerers created by the Seven Wise Gods became the Claire family. She must have inherited a large amount of that talent. Considering her youthful appearance, it might be a case of atavism.

Reiss was especially focused on Celia.

In her present state, she's unable to cast the magic without the incantation, and she didn't have the strength to manage Draugul on her own. But there's no telling how much she'll grow from here... She must be removed with highest priority after the Black Knight and the humanoid spirit girl.

The large number of revenants he sent had been subjugated, the mercenaries had the tables turned on them, and the secret Hero Killer had been defeated.

I am unable to summon Draugul successively at present. I have no cards left up my sleeve either.

In a rare show of frustration, Reiss resigned himself to giving up.

That aside, the descendant of a divine sorcerer and three talented girls, most likely demi-humans, each with a mid-class contract spirit. Then there's the formidable man and woman who probably came from the Yagumo region, and the Galarc Kingdom's hero, though still unawakened. Leading them all is the Black Knight, who's strong enough to rival a divine beast controlled by an awakened hero, and his powerful humanoid spirit. In terms of combat power, he's as much of a threat as that awakened saint. Although she'll probably be the bigger problem with her active hostility.

Now that he had failed to secure a hostage against the Black Knight and reduce the fighting strength at his side, Reiss was unsure how to proceed.

It won't be enough to just have the Hero Killer and Evil Black Wyvern as my primary forces when I execute the plan. If the Black Knight learns of the saint's survival, his attention might be able to be directed at her. For the time being, it'd be best to have the two of them fight it out while I secure new forces. All that's left is...

If his opponent's forces were greater than he had expected, he had no choice but to replenish his own. Doing so was no easy task, but Reiss had no choice but to work out a solution.

It's about time Duke Arbor took action against Rodania.

He contemplated the other plan he had brewing behind closed doors.

Oh, it seems they succeeded in retrieving Lucci and Lucius's enchanted sword.

Reiss spotted Arein's small squad that had infiltrated the castle and smirked. The operation this time had been a failure, but they had managed the bare minimum of a recovery at the very last moment.

And finally, to silence the survivors...

Reiss took out a small pouch filled with small, gemlike crystals and crushed them in his fist. He emptied the powdered fragments from the bag, watching them fall.

It's time for me to retreat as well.

He then flew away from the Galarc Castle.



Some time after Ariel brought Celia and the others back to the ground, King Francois received a visitor in the rooftop garden, where he was leading the cleanup efforts.

"Your Majesty!"

It was Clement Gregory, the head of a duke family on par with Duke Cretia.

"What is it, Clement?" Francois replied in an annoyed tone.

“I heard that the enemy’s target was Sir Amakawa’s mansion.”

The duke cut to the chase. Anyone observing the commotion would have noticed that the fighting was focused around Rio’s mansion. The aerial knights could still be seen circling the skies from their current position in the garden. Ground forces were running to and from the mansion with Francois’s instructions, so Duke Gregory may have heard the news from someone along the chain.

“News sure travels fast. That is the most likely assumption for this situation, but there’s no way of telling whether it’s true.”

“At any rate, Sir Amakawa must be questioned immediately.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible. Haruto is not in the capital right now,” Francois said with an annoyed shrug.

“What? At a time like this? Wait, I recall something about a message transmitted from Baudrier’s territory not too long ago...” Duke Gregory muttered, searching through his memories.

During his pursuit of the saint, Rio had used a magic transmission artifact from Margrave Baudrier’s territory to send a report to Francois. Messages sent from transmission artifacts could be viewed by anyone within the transmission range, so it wasn’t too strange for Duke Gregory to know about it.

“You sure hear things fast, don’t you?” Francois sighed in half disgust, half awe.

“First Cretia’s daughter, now this. The young ones these days have no respect for their position. The way they wander around rashly without settling down just shows how little awareness they have of themselves as nobility.” Duke Gregory shook his head in disapproval.

“Haruto is currently moving on my orders, though,” Francois said with a challenging look.

“Ah, is that so? Do forgive me. I am curious as to why he’s moving at the direct order of Your Majesty, though...” Duke Gregory’s eyes glinted with curiosity as he searched Francois’s expression. Only a select few people knew of Rio’s mission to rescue Liselotte—not even Duke Gregory was aware.

If he viewed the message from the transmission artifact, he should have guessed that Haruto is moving on my orders already... This old fox never changes.

Duke Gregory was probably using this chance to investigate what he had guessed. There was no need to come probing the moment the enemies had withdrawn, but his intentions were evident—he couldn't pass up this opportunity to fulfill it.

This was because for generations, the two great noble families of the Galarc Kingdom were Duke Cretia's and Duke Gregory's respective families, but the rise of Liselotte's Ricca Guild had caused the Cretia house's power to increase dramatically.

With the recent appearance of Haruto Amakawa, a new noble with many achievements to his name, Duke Cretia's connections were only growing stronger.

At this rate, the gap between Duke Gregory's and Duke Cretia's families would widen greatly in Clement's generation.

Thus, Clement Gregory wanted to find whatever faults he could. If there was anything he could bring Duke Cretia down for, he would take the opportunity to do so just to make his presence felt. He had been vigilantly watching for such opportunities, so this situation where he could pick faults with the newcomer noble Haruto Amakawa—who was on friendly terms with Liselotte—was the perfect chance.

"I plan on releasing the information in regards to what Haruto is doing once he returns. Wait until then."

"Understood." Clement bowed his head respectfully. "However, the residents of the mansion should be questioned about this incident. I know that Your Majesty is extremely busy, so if you delegate the task to me, I can commence the questioning immediately..."

He immediately changed his approach by offering to investigate those around Rio.

"No need. I've left the mansion in Charlotte's hands." Francois dismissed the

matter by bringing up Charlotte's name.

"Oh, is that so? Of course, that makes sense. I understand." Clement backed down surprisingly easily.

"However... I've heard many curious witness accounts on my way here. As a newcomer to these parts, Sir Amakawa is surrounded in mystery already. I understand the need to be careful, what with the hero being on familiar terms with him, but there are a great number of people who wish to know what caused the attack..." Clement said while staring at Francois's face, hinting at his desire to have the details of the attack released publicly.

I see, so his goal was to have me pledge a commitment here...

In other words, it was a roundabout way of exercising control.

A lot of the information regarding Rio and the people around him was kept confidential at Francois's order. This in itself was common knowledge, and not even the great nobles like Clement could easily object to the direct order of the king.

However, it was a different matter when they had a justified reason.

For example, in this situation where Rio's mansion had clearly been the target of the attack, if the matter of the castle and its personnel being harmed was emphasized, Francois would have a difficult time refusing to release the information.

"Of course, the essential details of the attack will be shared. On a later date, that is."

Francois nodded in agreement, adding a clause for only the essential details. With that, the matter became easier for Clement to bring up in the future.

"I am relieved to hear that. In that case, I shall take my leave now." Clement bowed deeply and left with a spring in his step.

Depending on the goal and circumstances of the mercenaries, things could get rather troublesome. Goodness...

Francois sighed heavily to expel his exhaustion, looking over at Rio's mansion as though to see the troubles looming in the future.



The day after Gouki and the others repelled the Hero Killer, in the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. A unanimous vote had just been passed by the congress.

“Then it’s decided,” Erica, the first head of state, announced solemnly.

“...”

The congress hall was filled with members representing the people, but it was oddly silent for having just passed a vote.

Everyone was holding their breath for Erica’s declaration of the vote.

“Our nation will now invade the Galarc Kingdom.”

It was a declaration of war.

“Ooooooh!”

The congress hall burst into cheer. Everyone in the room was crazed for war. A tiny nation at the outskirts of Strahl was challenging one of the leading powers of the continent.

It wasn’t a sane decision by any means, yet everyone believed.

They believed in their victory.

And they believed that Saint Erica would lead them to that victory.

“Saint Erica!”

“Saint Erica!”

“Saint Erica!”

“Saint Erica!”

“Saint Erica!”

“Saint Erica!”

“Saint Erica!”

The congress members yelled her name with all their heart and soul.

Watching them, Erica smirked softly. “Hehe.”

Her lips twisted, and the corners of her mouth tugged upwards.

As though she were a saint.

As though she were a witch.

Not a single person in the room knew of the future she envisioned, but they believed in her.

They believed that she would lead them to victory.

But the day they would learn of the future that awaited them was much closer than they thought.

Epilogue

Three days after the attack by the Heavenly Lions, in the afternoon, King Francois of Galarc was visiting Rio's mansion for the first time since the attack.

Part of the reason was to hear the testimonies of the residents, but he had already received an advance report of that from Charlotte, who gathered the necessary information immediately after the attack. The biggest reason for his visit was to thank those who contributed the most to repelling the insurgents and meet Gouki's group for the first time.

The reason for the wait was related to the reason why Francois was visiting the mansion in person instead of summoning them to the castle.

The battle with the Hero Killer Draugul had been witnessed across the capital, including by those in the castle. It was clear that summoning them to the castle immediately after the fight would result in meddling nobles attempting to make contact.

However, much of the information in Charlotte's report was better kept confidential. Releasing the information carelessly could result in provoking antipathy from Satsuki or Rio, which was undesirable for Francois as well. There were also some matters he wanted to obtain Rio's consent for when releasing the information. Waiting before the visit also allowed him to buy time before Rio's return, which was why Francois was only visiting after three days.

Incidentally, Sara and Gouki had not revealed all their secrets to the Galarc Kingdom. For example, they had explained the existence of spirit arts and how Hel, Ifritah, and Ariel were spirits, but the fact that Sara's group were demi-humans—as the humans would call them—was kept hidden. Gouki's group had introduced themselves as people connected to Rio's parents, but they had refrained from explaining the details of Rio's birth without his permission.

But that aside, they had just finished exchanging the necessary greetings with each other.

“And so, I welcome you to the Galarc Kingdom,” Francois said to Gouki and Kayoko.

“We are extremely grateful for your forgiveness over how we entered your castle uninvited.” Gouki bowed his head, expressing his respect for the foreign king through his demeanor.

They were currently in the dining hall of the mansion. Although it was comparatively minor, Rio’s mansion had been damaged in the mercenary attack. The window in the drawing room was still broken, so they were gathered in the dining hall instead. They were also to be served lunch after this.

Present in the hall were Francois, Gouki, Kayoko, as well as Charlotte, Satsuki, Miharu, Celia, Sara, and Orphia. Alma was fully healed but resting just to be safe, and Latifa was keeping her company.

“Come to think of it, your people entered the castle grounds from the skies. Ha ha, it’s fine, it doesn’t bother me,” Francois said with a hearty smile. He then turned to Gouki. “We can save the details for Haruto’s return, but I would like to confirm your intentions from here. Would it be right to consider your people as Haruto’s private army—or rather, vassals? Your relationship to him seems somewhat different to that of Sara and the other girls. I am prepared to offer you a befitting status as a reward for your contribution to repelling the insurgents, if you so desire.”

“That’s another complicated matter to address... For the time being, you can think of us as cooperators instead of vassals. Sir Haruto is rather against the notion of seeing us below him,” Gouki answered with a somewhat troubled smile.

“I see... That tends to be a troubling aspect of his personality,” Francois said, returning the smile. “But I understand. Perhaps it would be best to leave this discussion until his return after all.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back in no time at all if he can fly. He may even drop by out of the blue today,” Charlotte added.

“The spirit arts you mentioned, was it? The existence of spirits is rather hard to believe, but that was how the saint was tracked, you said.”

Francois's words were uttered with the knowledge of Aishia's identity as a humanoid spirit. This wasn't something that Sara and the others had told him intentionally—the reveal of their spirits had allowed Charlotte to guess that Rio had one as well, which then led to the guess that Aishia tracked the saint by being in spirit form.

“Umm... Haruto may have returned just now,” Sara interrupted, raising her hand.

“Why, I will go meet him at the front gate immediately.” Charlotte shot to her feet in delight.

“Wouldn't he be surprised to see you knowingly waiting for him?” Satsuki asked, pointing out how he wasn't aware that she knew about spirits now.

“That's what makes it interesting,” Charlotte replied with a thrilled look.

Satsuki was drawn into grinning along. “In that case, I might as well tag along.”

And so, it was decided that a group of them would go out to meet Rio.



Charlotte, Satsuki, Miharu, and Celia had gone out to meet Rio at the front gate of the castle.

They watched as Rio and the others walked towards them from the noble district with Liselotte.

“He really brought her back... Amazing...” Satsuki muttered. Her tone was more hopeful and awed than exasperated. He was much more of a hero than her, she thought.

“It's Sir Haruto, after all.” Charlotte nodded with a triumphant expression, as though it was only natural.

“It's amazing how convincing those words can be.”

“Right?”

Satsuki and Miharu exchanged strained smiles.

“Just as we expected, he looks surprised to see us. Shall we go to him?” Celia

looked at Rio's rounded eyes from afar and giggled with a dimpled smile.

"Yes, let's go. Hey, Haruto!" Satsuki waved her arms while breaking into a jog. Charlotte followed behind her. They eventually got close enough to speak to him.

"Welcome back, Haruto! Liselotte, Aishia, and Aria too!" Satsuki said, beaming.

"Hello... We've returned." Rio was still confused.

"Hee hee. A lot happened while you were away, Sir Haruto." Delighted by his confusion, Charlotte walked up to Rio and entangled herself around his arm. She then tugged on it once before turning to speak to Liselotte. "I'm so glad you're safe, Liselotte. Welcome back."

"Thank you, Princess Charlotte."

Like Rio, Liselotte looked bewildered.

"I've completed your entry procedures, so please tell me everything that happened. Gouki and the others are also waiting at the mansion," Charlotte said teasingly, peering at Rio's face.

"..."

Rio was at a loss for words. He was clearly wondering what in the world had happened while he was gone.

"Stop that, Char. These two still haven't given their greetings yet," Satsuki said, scolding Charlotte for trying to monopolize Rio's attention. "I have a lot I want to say too, but Celia and Miharuru worked really hard while Haruto was gone, remember? So let them talk to him too. Go on, you two."

She pushed the hesitant Miharuru and Celia towards Rio.

"Erm..."

They exchanged slightly embarrassed looks with each other.

"Welcome back."

They celebrated Rio's return with gentle smiles.



Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* volume 19—Tachi of Wind.

So, volume 19 has been released! I believe most of you are reading this afterword after the story, but I've also heard that some people like to read from the afterword, so I'll try to refrain from giving too many spoilers.

Now, to start, Rio has a tendency to fight alone too much. Part of the reason is because he has too much power, but his personality that prevents him from getting others involved also plays a big part.

The people who normally spend their time around him naturally understand that, but I hoped to depict how they accepted that, how they wanted to live with that, and what kind of growth they go through!

In the upcoming volume 20, there'll be plenty of action around Rio and Aishia based on the developments of volume 19.

Just like how volume 10 was a big turning point for the story, volume 20 will also bring about big developments...or so I hope, so please look forward to the release!

As always, there's a preview of the next volume at the end of this book, so check that out. The subtitle will be "Her Crusade."

Next, information about the anime series has started being released bit by bit. The latest news can be found on the official website, *Seirei Gensouki's* official Twitter, and occasionally on my own Twitter. Please follow them if you're interested!

There are still many things I can't tell you, but I believe the anime of *Seirei Gensouki* will be wonderful.

As the author, I'm cooperating with the production wherever I can, and I can keenly feel the professionalism of everyone every day.

And so, I hope you'll look forward to both volume 20 of the novel and the anime series! Let's enjoy the show together once it broadcasts!

Finally, I extend my deepest gratitude to the readers and everyone involved! Let us meet again in volume 20!

Yuri Kitayama

March 2021

Bonus Short Stories

Elemental ☆ Red Riding Hood!

In Japan on a Friday, not long after the start of the school term...

Endou Suzune was a little girl in sixth grade of elementary school. It was springtime.

Ding dong, ding dong.

As the bell for the end of the school day chimed in the background, Suzune's pleated skirt fluttered as she ran through the school building, panting excitedly.

"Bye!" Her destination: the bus stop beside the school gate.

"All right, I made it in time... Hopefully!"

There was over five minutes until the next bus. Bus schedules were always unreliable, but she should be safe.

Suzune normally stayed back in the classroom to chat with her friends after school, but there was a reason why she was in a hurry today. She had made a promise with her older friends to meet on the bus today.

"I'm at the bus stop now...and send," she murmured, writing a message to the group chat on her phone. The message was immediately marked as read, and a reply arrived: "We're almost at your school now."

Less than a minute later, the bus arrived.

"Hi, Haruto, Miharuru! And you must be Sara. Hello, it's nice to meet you. I'm Endou Suzune!"

There were three passengers sitting together on the bus. Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharuru were friends of Suzune's, but she was meeting Sara for the first time today. These three were the people she had promised to meet up with.

“Hello, Suzune. How do you do?” Sara bowed politely, lowering her head.

“Wow... Your silver hair is so pretty...” Suzune muttered unthinkingly, enchanted by Sara’s appearance.

Sara smiled shyly, unsure how to respond. “Umm... Thank you very much.”

“Miharu mentioned it already, but your Japanese is really good,” Suzune commented.

As her words suggested, Sara wasn’t Japanese. She had transferred to Haruto and Miharu’s high school a few days ago.

“Thank goodness. That means I’ll be able to participate in the play without issue.”

“Oh! You’re going to be in the play too, Sara?” Suzune asked happily.

There was a preschool affiliated with Haruto and Miharu’s high school, which the drama club had once put on a play for. The children had loved it so much, they requested that they put on another show. Haruto and Miharu were participating as members of the student council, and this time, Suzune had a part as well.

“Yes. I heard you were playing Little Red Riding Hood. I’m going to be playing the wolf, so let’s both do our best together.”

On top of that, Sara had been given a role as well. The chosen play was Little Red Riding Hood. Satsuki, the student council president, had decided an elementary school student would be better suited for the role than a high school student, so Suzune was asked to take it on.

“Yup! But if you’re going to be the wolf, I’d rather be friends than enemies.”

“I’d also like to be friends, but that won’t be good for the play. I’m pretty confident in playing wolves, so make sure you act scared,” Sara said, puffing up her chest proudly.

What does she mean by “confident in playing wolves”? Haruto wondered to himself.

“Yes! I’ll do my best!” Suzune nodded enthusiastically, unbothered by Sara’s words.

“You can try on the Red Riding Hood costume once it’s done,” Miharuru said to Suzune with a smile.

“Yay! I can’t wait!”

In the end, the Little Red Riding Hood play was well received by the preschool. Suzune was a big hit with the children for being so cute, and Sara was a little disappointed that no one found her scary as the wolf role, but that’s a story for another day.

Celia’s Morning Bath

One day, in the stone house...

Celia Claire was having an early morning.

“Mmm...” she yawned, sitting up in bed and stretching.

That was a good sleep...

Celia wasn’t really a morning person, but she felt rather refreshed today. Going to bed early last night had done wonders. She climbed out of bed and made her way over to the window, opening it to look outside.

A cool breeze blew in from the window. She normally woke up to the sound of Rio and the others sparring energetically outside, but today, everything was still silent.

The sun hasn’t risen fully yet. It’s a little early for morning training to begin... I wonder if anyone else is up yet.

Celia decided to leave her room.

It doesn’t seem like anyone’s up yet...

The kitchen and living room were still dark.

Hmm... What should I do?

She could stay in her room and read, but it seemed like a waste of a rare morning up early. She thought for a moment.

“Oh, that’s right.”

An idea suddenly came to her, and she started walking towards the bathroom in high spirits. She took off all her clothes in the changing room and headed inside the bathroom. There, she washed her hair, followed by her body.

My hair and skin have been so nice since I started using Rio's soap. The scent is lovely too.

Celia sniffed happily at the scent of the soap. Once she finished cleaning her body, she submerged herself in the bathtub.

"Ah... This is bliss..." she sighed, melting into the water.

I normally bathe with everyone after training, but...

Was it because she had gotten up earlier than usual? Or was it because she was enjoying her morning bath by herself so much? It felt like such a luxury to spend her time like this.

Perhaps I should get up early again tomorrow.

Those were the thoughts that filled her head this morning.

Satsuki's Morning

One early morning in the Galarc Castle, shortly after Rio was bestowed his mansion by King Francois...

"Mm..."

Sumeragi Satsuki was sleeping soundly in a bedroom on the second floor of the mansion. When she suddenly opened her eyes, she was met with the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling.

Where...

She questioned her whereabouts for a second.

Oh, that's right. I stayed over at Haruto's mansion yesterday.

She sleepily recalled the reason why she was here.

"Ah... Mmm!"

She let out a cute and unguarded yawn, then sat up and stretched to relax her

body.

Now...

Satsuki was a morning person. She felt no need to go back to sleep, so she got out of bed and headed for the closet. Once she changed, she left her room and headed for the staircase to the first floor, but...

Hmm... Did I get up too early?

The mansion was completely silent. The lights were on in the corridor, but the living room and kitchen were still dark.

I said I'd train in the morning, and I've already changed... Whatever, I'll just head outside and warm up first.

Waiting patiently in the bedroom or living room for someone to get up wasn't in her nature. Satsuki headed for the living room window that faced the garden.

Huh...?

The window was unlocked. Someone must have forgotten to lock it.

It's Haruto.

Rio could be seen swinging his sword in the garden.

It doesn't seem like anyone else is up yet.

Which meant Satsuki was the second one up. She could head outside to talk to him, but— *His movements are always so clean...*

Satsuki stopped to watch Rio. Rio was currently using the wind to move, without applying any of his own muscle strength. That's why his movements were irregular but efficient. There was barely any waste in his actions, making it impossible to predict how he would move next. Such movements were so beautiful, she couldn't help but keep watching.

After a while, Satsuki returned to her senses and started wondering if there was anything she could gain from watching him. She began observing him closely.

It's kind of like I'm observing someone at morning practice in a sports club.

She suddenly thought to herself. It was both a new and nostalgic thought,

which made her let out a giggle.

“Satsuki?” Rio had come over to the window while she was lost in her thoughts, calling out to her.

“H-Haruto?!”

“I could see you in the window... Good morning.”

Satsuki twitched. “Morning. You always appear out of nowhere...”

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” Rio said apologetically.

“No, it’s fine. I think I’ll join you. Oh, but I have to warm up first. Haruto, will you help me stretch?”

“Sure.”

“Yay. Then let’s start with some stretching.” Satsuki sat down cheerfully and bent forward.

Thus, Rio and Satsuki spent their morning alone until the others woke up. The first to come across them was Latifa, who made a huge fuss over it, but that’s a story for another day.



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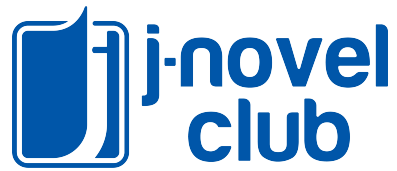
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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 19

by Yuri Kitayama

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